

# Operation Eradicate : Part One

---

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete



Created by FicLab

[www.ficlab.com](http://www.ficlab.com)

# **Operation Eradicate : Part One**

**VraieEsprit**

# Copyright Information

---

This ebook was automatically created by [FicLab](#) v1.0.110 on December 8th, 2024, based on content retrieved from [www.fanfiction.net/s/3706911/](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/3706911/).

The content in this book is copyrighted by [VraieEsprit](#) or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at [www.ficlab.com/author-faq](http://www.ficlab.com/author-faq).

This story was first published on August 6th, 2007, and was last updated on August 26th, 2007.

FicLab ID: `_XeYakWr/m4g5jcxp/10700E581`

# Table of Contents

---

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12

# Summary

---

<b>title</b>	Operation Eradicate : Part One
<b>author</b>	VraieEsprit
<b>source</b>	<a href="https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3706911/">https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3706911/</a>
<b>published</b>	August 6th, 2007
<b>updated</b>	August 26th, 2007
<b>words</b>	77,024
<b>chapters</b>	12
<b>status</b>	Complete
<b>rating</b>	Fiction T
<b>tags</b>	Anime/Manga, Complete, Fanfiction, Fi/ Fantasy, Sci, Tenchi Muyo

## Description

Tenchi's graduation should be cause for celebration, but sinister things are afoot on the Earth as they are embroiled in a dangerous political game. On Jurai, Seiryō suffers a nasty shock and Kiyone's desire to help finds her involved in intrigue again!

# Chapter 1

---

## Introduction and Disclaimer

This time it is official — this is the **definite** final installment of my ever expanding Tenchi/Ryoko OVA/TU/anything under the sun mish-mash AU fiction saga. (Phew that was a mouthful in itself, wasn't it?).

—inserts brief caveat here — unless I suddenly have a brilliant and inspirational plan about something else to write, in which case there may be another story. But my intention is that this is the last one in the sequence. I really don't think I have another one in me... to be honest, I only wrote this one because Seiryō and Kiyone cried out for more story time and I couldn't resist teasing the Tenchi and Ryoko thing a little more.—

Oh boy. Well. If I stay that my starting point was a wedding and my final ending point was potential intergalactic war, you'll probably tell me there's something wrong with my little grey cells... lol :) In truth, my intention was for this to be a nice, simple, light-hearted Tenchi and Ryoko story, with Seiryō and Kiyone tying up some loose ends along the way.

And that's not... quite... what I got.

The main antagonist in this story is not like that of the others I've written in this arc. In fact, the main antagonist is probably not a person at all — but a feeling — a sensation of misunderstanding, of paranoia, of resentment for the past. Does that sound overly deep? Hopefully what I mean will become clear as the story continues. I'm not sure how else to explain it... or totally where it's going to end up. It's gone through so many incarnations, and I've written and discarded so many snippets along the way. I think Kiyone will get a little bit of further character development in this story — I have a feeling it will be quite a prominent one for her, because it's about time I wrote in the mental backstory I dreamed up for her to use after Hawk of Jurai but never did. It'll also give a slightly different view of Seiryō — I wanted to paint him in a different light from the noble peer who's cool, calm and generally in control of the situation around him. And — I hope — it might also give a glimpse of him as the Galaxy Police Agent as well — if things go according to plan. It's been real hard to pin who the main characters are for this fiction (and Seiryō isn't an option, because FFnet does not include him among the character name

choices, which is a pain! Noike can exist, but Seiryō can't? WTF is that about — Seiryō has way more appearances than Noike if you take into account GXP — and what about Kiyone Masaki? Grr!).)

As Tenchi graduates and prepares to leave Osaka properly, it's a test for him not only of the strength of his relationship with Ryoko but also his relationship with his fellow former students and the implications the connections to Jurai have had on the people around him. Yes, the Earth's still going through shockwaves... ah, you'll see what I mean. ;) The story will reintroduce a friend from Hawk of Jurai which has only been mentioned fleetingly since then — an OC Earthling called Kane Kyoda whose significance will very soon become clear!

(You get a cookie if you remembered him from Hawk of Jurai!)

Usual legal stuff applies. Let's see where we end up!  
(*I'm in a brutal mood... there may be blood...*)

This should be a two part story, I think. Uploading might not be as quick as past stories have been, though. Part one is complete on my flash disk and part two is written out in plan form... but I'm working on several things at present as well as working and doing other things. It will come, but as I've said before — I'm making no guarantee for time scale!

### **Synopsis**

*Spring is in the air, cherry blossom is falling from the trees and Tenchi has finally graduated from university. Now that his schooling is behind him, he is eager to set a firm date with his unpredictable fiancée — and finally cement their bond into something permanent and unchanging.*

*But where Tenchi and Ryoko's relationship is concerned, nothing is ever completely straight forward. Aside from the obvious hostility of certain of Tenchi's former classmates towards the human-alien match, something more sinister is stirring in the shadows, as uncertainty becomes paranoia and then defiance in the hearts of certain of his fellow citizens. As it becomes clear that somehow the Galaxy Police are involved in what looks like a major leak of secure information, a sinister suggestion begins to make itself clear to Ryoko and her associates. Is someone deliberately trying to put a rift between Earth and Jurai? Washu is determined to investigate before something prevents her daughter from having the happy ever after she herself was denied.*

*Meanwhile, Seiryō is reeling from a devastating personal blow, and in his anguish he calls Kiyone, hardly realising that her coming to Jurai may well find her embroiled in the middle of a covert investigation as she struggles not only to prevent him from becoming a victim but also to*

discover why someone has been digging into Jurai's court history and what they truly want with her testimony in front of Jurai's Emperor almost a year before.

Being a spy isn't a natural impulse, and Kiyone's life might be in danger, and yet, with Seiryō in no state to take action for himself, Kiyone is determined to protect him in any way she can.

But it's not so simple, when the man you might be spying on is a spy himself — and one with a considerable grudge against the former Galaxy Police Elite Agent...

## **OPERATION: ERADICATE**

### **Part One**

### **A Tenchi Muyo! Fanfiction**

by

**VRAIEESPRIT**

### **Chapter One**

#### **Deep Space**

#### **Some Years Earlier**

*"Sound the alarm! I repeat, sound the alarm! We have an intruder in Vector Twelve!"*

*As the siren began to wail out across the bank complex, the frantic security officer jammed buttons and switches across his control panel, struggling to let his colleagues know that a serious breach of security had been discovered at the base of his division. As he attempted to repeat his transmission, a tremendous explosion from below rocked through his whole office, sending him tumbling to the ground with an exclamation of alarm. Scrambling for his weapon, he pulled himself to his feet, gripping the gun tightly as he pushed back the door, making his way along the hallway towards the source of the disturbance.*

*As he reached the end of the corridor, a second explosion ripped through the bowels of the bank vault, followed by a loud crashing sound, and instinctively the guard knew that the central security deposit unit had been penetrated. He quickened his pace, finding that other guards from other divisions had answered his distress call and as he joined his colleagues in pursuit of the enemy, he felt somewhat comforted that he wasn't going into the unknown alone.*

*The door of the main vault had been completely blown off its hinges, and as the security officers massed around it, preparing for any sudden movements, the Vector Twelve guard paused to take in the devastation in front of him. Crumbled plaster and stone were heaped along the normally*



spotless hallways, and more than one electric light panel flickered and buzzed as the power short-circuited through them. The result was an eerie, faltering blue ambience, and somehow it only added to the tension of the occasion.

“What the hell?” One of the other guards stepped forward, touching the destroyed door with a hesitant finger. “What are we dealing with? Someone radio for further back up — it looks like we’ve got a serious pirate raid going on here and who knows how many of them there are hiding in the depths of this place?”

The Vector Twelve guard’s grip tightened even more on his weapon, remembering only too well the last time a pirate guild had launched an attack on his bank. It had been a Daluma raid, he recalled, and several people had been killed in the resultant shoot-out. He was not keen to repeat the experience.

“Well, boys... it’s nice of you to put on a welcome for me.”

As the men hesitated, assessing their best options, they were interrupted by the sound of a woman’s voice, and as they watched, a figure slowly materialised in front of them, casting them a flirtatious grin. Despite himself, the Vector Twelve guard gasped, drawing breath sharply as he recognised her features. She was young, with wild, wavy hair flowing out across her shoulders, and her vivid amber eyes sparkled with life and mischief, as if the business of breaking into one of the most secure banks in the universe was simply another game. She was dressed simply, in the tight-fitting convenience wear of a pirate going about her business, but somehow it did not seem either casual or careless on her... more that she had spent as much time perfecting her look for dramatic and flirtatious effect as she had planning her attack on the vault itself. She hovered above them, light glittering intermittantly across her palms as she surveyed them thoughtfully, and despite himself, the guard took a wary step back.

“Ryoko.” He whispered.

Delight flickered in the woman’s expression and she let out an amused laugh, the energy at her fingertips swelling and growing as she met his gaze. She tut-tutted, shaking her head as if in reproof.

“Space Pirate Ryoko to you.” She whispered, and a jet of orange energy flared across the room, narrowly missing his feet by inches. The guard yelped, leaping back, and Ryoko winked at him coyly, seemingly unmoved by his panic. He gazed at the scorched ground beneath his feet, realising in an instant that had she meant to hit him, she would easily have done so. He swallowed hard.

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

Another guard found his voice at that moment, raising his weapon in Ryoko's direction. "And you're going to wish you'd stayed that way — after all, our alarms are linked up to the Galaxy Police, and they'll soon be here. They'll get you, you just wait and see. This is where your raiding ends, Space Pirate Ryoko. Surrender yourself and you won't be hurt!"

"Dead, huh?" Ryoko looked startled, then she smiled. "Did you really think I was enough of an idiot to be caught up in Haki's foolhardy mistakes? It takes more than a little spaceship explosion to kill the Space Pirate Ryoko, you know. Do you really think you can stop me? Bring on the Galaxy Police. I like a bit of excitement, now and again."

"Surrender or we'll shoot, pirate!" Another man cocked his gun also, and Ryoko pretended to look hurt.

"Well, you boys really aren't very friendly to a pretty woman like me." She remarked off-handedly. "Guess you need to be taught a few manners, before I go."

Light flared across her hands once more and a series of explosions sounded out around the room, sending more plaster and stone crashing to the floor, and causing at least three more panel lights to short circuit. Sparks flew in all directions, and despite their conviction, many guards dropped to the floor, covering their heads to shelter themselves from falling debris.

Ryoko chuckled.

"Take it as a token of my affection." She said playfully. "I'm sorry I can't stay around and play any longer, but I'm sure you understand how very busy I am."

She turned, casting a glance towards the thick perspex window of the corridor, and even from his crouched position, the Vector Twelve guard could see a looming shape drawing up alongside the bank complex.

"Ryo Ohki, let's get out of here." Ryoko said firmly, and there was an answering, eerie yowl as the shape pulled ever nearer. Ryoko turned to the men, casting them a coquettish smile as she winked, blowing them a kiss.

"Don't forget to tell the Galaxy Police boys what a good time we had this evening." She said teasingly. "Make sure they know that the Space Pirate Ryoko is far from dead — and that it'll take more than a few stun guns to stop her!"

With that she flickered out of view, and a second eerie howl from space told the frightened guards that she had indeed made good on her escape. Even as the men hurried to the windows, the jagged shadow of the Ryo Ohki was speeding away from them, disappearing into the distance as if

*just another star on the horizon.*

*The Vector Twelve guard sighed, pressing his hands to the perspex as lights began to flicker around the bank complex, announcing the arrival of the Galaxy Police.*

*“Space Pirate Ryoko.” He murmured. “To think we fought her and lived.”*

*“Hardly fought.” A second man said acidly. “How do you fight a demon? Everyone knows that Ryoko was hell-born — and if she walked away from an explosion that killed a man like Haki, she really must be. How else could she be so brazen... and how could she cause so much destruction all by herself? She’s just one woman — barely more than a girl. How else could she do it, if she wasn’t a demon?”*

*“I guess all the rumours about her are true.” The Vector Twelve guard said heavily. “Did you see how she was dressed?”*

*“Couldn’t miss it.” The second man acknowledged. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was deliberately trying to be distracting. I guess noone told her that flaunting her figure across space whilst she commits crime after crime isn’t exactly ladylike behaviour. Someone needs to sit her down and teach her a few lessons about how to behave.”*

*“Well, you said she was a demon.” The Vector Twelve guard reminded him. “How do you tame a creature like that?”*

*“Do you think the Police will catch her?” A third man asked. The Vector Twelve guard hesitated for a moment, and then shook his head.*

*“No, I don’t.” He said honestly. “Haki might be dead and gone, but banks all over deep space have a new threat now. This Ryoko woman is going to cause us all no end of mischief... I guarantee it.”*

## Chapter 2

---

### Chapter Two Earth *Some Years Later.*

“You know, I’d swear on my life that some of this junk hadn’t been shifted for a long, long time.”

Washu sat back against the wall, eying the pile of boxes, odds and ends with a mixture of suspicion and dislike. “I don’t know why you don’t just open a sub-dimension and drop the whole lot into it, Noboyuki-san. It would save a whole lot of time and energy and I have several hundred other things that I should be taking care of right now. Why did you rope me into this anyway? Where’s your son? Isn’t it his job to be your unpaid slave whenever you can’t find anything?”

“Tenchi and Ryoko are still in Osaka until the weekend, because of his graduation party, and I wanted to find what I was looking for before then.” Noboyuki said pensively, sitting back on his heels as he sent his companion an amused glance. “As for the sub-dimension, Washu, not all of us can open holes in thin air and throw rubbish through them. And besides, some of this stuff is important. A lot of old memories are tied up in this room — that’s why I hoped you’d help me get to the bottom of it.”

“Well, when you said you had a little bit of sorting to do, I should have known that you meant a landslide.” Washu sighed, getting to her feet and glancing ruefully at her scuffed nails as she did so. “Men always underestimate problems when they want a woman’s help. I never learn, do I?”

“With all your magic, I thought you’d be as good a bet as anyone.” Noboyuki agreed blithely, reaching down to push an old, battered box to one side. “But I do appreciate your help, Washu. After all, it is all in a good cause — or it will be, when I find what I’m looking for.”

“What, exactly, are we looking for?” Washu eyed her companion quizzically, hovering over the boxes as she peered into the gloom beyond. “Aside from the fact we’re standing inside the room that time forgot — what’s in here that’s so urgent it just can’t wait?”

“I’m looking for an old photo album.” Noboyuki turned, offering her a smile. “A very old one, you’ll probably say, and one I haven’t

looked at in years and years.”

“A photo album?” Washu stopped, staring at him in disbelief. “All this over a bunch of stupid photographs? Are you serious?”

“Not so stupid.” Noboyuki’s face became grave and he shook his head, sitting down on the worn old box as he did so. “They’re the photos from my wedding — of Achika and I on that happy day. With Tenchi and Ryoko so keen to banter about dates and times recently, and with his graduation now behind us, I thought maybe he’d like to see his parents’ wedding photos. I’ve never had cause to show him before, but it seems appropriate now.”

“Wedding...?” Washu’s expression softened, and gently she set down on the floor beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realise they were that kind of pictures. But how come Tenchi hasn’t seen these before, Noboyuki-san? Surely he’s asked you questions galore about Lady Achika, and with all this matrimonial teasing that’s been going on of late, he must have wondered about your own wedding.”

“He has asked, but I’ve always told him I don’t know where the book is.” Noboyuki admitted. “Achika was very dear to me, Washu, and for many years I couldn’t bring myself to revive those memories again. Tenchi was very young, really, when she passed away... too young to remember everything about her and the way in which she was. But she was the most important person in my life for many years. It’s hard, sometimes, to go back. That’s why.”

“I see.” Washu pursed her lips. “Yes, and I understand. I’m being altogether too hard on you, when I’m probably guilty of exactly the same kind of information hoarding.”

She grinned, revealing a row of perfect white teeth. “But now I know what we’re after, I agree that it’s all in a good cause. You’re sure it’s here, in one of these boxes? It couldn’t have been put anywhere else?”

“This is the last place to look — all of Achika’s stuff is in here, in one box or another.” Noboyuki nodded his head. “I kept a lot, really. I always told myself that I kept it for Tenchi’s benefit, but in truth it I found it hard to let go.”

“Hrm.” Washu faltered for a moment, her hand going to her throat as she fingered a gleaming gold chain that hung around her neck. A bright new clasp held the expensive, carefully crafted item in place, and as she ran her finger over the engraved centre of the medallion, a sheepish expression crossed her face. “Well, I suppose that makes

sense. We all have our keepsakes, after all.”

“I suppose we do.” Noboyuki admitted. “Although I’ve never seen Father take the same approach with either Haruna-san or Itsuki-san. I suppose it’s just a different point of view — he always manages to be so serene about these worldly things and I just don’t get it at all.”

“Lord Katsuhito is quite another kind of man.” Washu pursed her lips. “And I rather think Tenchi is beginning to take after him, in many respects. No offence, Noboyuki-san, but I think that’s probably a good thing... not that your own influence over him isn’t important, but I really think I’ve begun to see the Juraian in him, this past year.”

“No, I’ve seen it too.” Noboyuki nodded. “And it’s another reason I want to find this stuff. Achika-chan was his link with that family, not me... I’m not even truly a Masaki, not really. The shrine has rather dominated the naming of our family for the last few generations — but I’m well aware that my son is no ordinary Earth boy.”

“It goes in his favour, though, that he is who he is.” Washu eyed the pile of boxes contemplatively, flexing her fingers and then probing them through the cardboard, groping around inside as she ran her hand over the box’s contents. “Yeesh, there is a lot of junk in there. What colour is this album, anyway?”

“White, with a red border.” Noboyuki frowned. “But how are you going to know if you find it? You can’t tell colours by finger-tips, can you?”

“No, I can’t.” Washu agreed cheerfully. “But my fingers aren’t the only part of me that can go through boxes. White and red, huh? All right. You keep searching at the front here... I’ll go further back and see what I can see.”

Before Noboyuki could respond, the scientist had pushed the rest of her body through the flimsy cardboard and the dusty, stacked up contents towards the far side of the room, holding her breath against the pockets of dust that assailed her as she moved. As she reached the furthest wall, she spied a small space between two precarious piles of belongings and carefully she phased herself into it, dusting herself down absently as she scanned the inked labels that marked each container.

“Well?” Noboyuki’s voice sounded muffled and distant, and Washu frowned.

“I think I’ve found Tenchi’s baby clothes, and a bunch of stuff that’s got something written on it in Katsuhito’s handwriting. God only

knows what it's meant to say... like most of his shrine scribbles, it looks like something died and got squashed in a long, straight line. Otherwise the boxes aren't marked. I didn't see anything on my way through, but there is a dusty pile here in the corner I haven't tackled yet. Maybe it's in there. No luck your end?"

"Not yet, although I did find a couple of albums of Tenchi when he was younger." Noboyuki responded. "Thank you, Washu... and you know, if you need some help getting the dust off your clothing afterwards, I'm always willing to help out."

"Shame on you." Washu tut-tutted, amusement in her eyes as she hopped neatly up onto the side of the pile of boxes. "Saying such things while looking for your wedding photos — what would Achika say to you, if she could hear you?"

"She'd probably give me a look and tell me to act my age." Noboyuki admitted, and Washu gave an amused chuckle.

"She had your measure, then." She said appreciatively. "I always knew she was a smart woman."

"My son takes after her as much as he does his Grandfather." Noboyuki agreed. "Maybe I'll keep some of these on one side too. Just in case Tenchi wants to look at them. Seems a shame not to, while I have them out."

"Makes sense to me." Washu agreed. "Earthlings have such primitive ways of keeping memories, but then again, I think it works for them. A digital data drive can crash and erase thousands and thousands of happy memories. Perhaps something more tangible is a better option, after all."

She pushed her hands through the box, her fingers closing around something hard and bound, and she frowned, pulling it out. As soon as she saw it, she knew it wasn't the missing album, but it was indeed a book, dark in colour but faded and worn by years of use. Leaning back against the wall she flicked it open, glancing over the contents with a smile.

"I might have found something else Tenchi should see." She remarked. "I think I found your sketch-pad, Noboyuki."

"My what?" Noboyuki sounded alarmed, and Washu laughed.

"It's no secret that you used to draw. When I sent Tenchi and co back in time to help Achika, we saw that well enough." She said. "But I had the impression you drew pictures of houses. I didn't realise you also had a sketchpad full of Achika-sama and Tenchi, Noboyuki-san."

These are really well done — no wonder your son has such an amazing talent.”

“Those were put away when Achika died — she was the only one who ever saw them.” Noboyuki said slowly and Washu flickered her form out of the small corner, re-materialising in front of him as she held the old book out.

“Then here.” She said solemnly. “I can keep a secret. It’s yours, and you probably want it back.”

“Yes... I suppose so.” Carefully Noboyuki thumbed through the pages, a wry look on his face. “I’d forgotten about some of these. I haven’t drawn in ages, Washu, except in a work capacity. Houses are all I draw these days and even seeing Tenchi following artistic tendencies at college hasn’t stirred me to do anything about it. I suppose the drawing stopped when Achika did, too... I had far too much to do, raising a son on my own to worry about it.”

“You shut half your life away when Achika died, didn’t you?” Washu tilted her head, eying him compassionately as he nodded. “I understand that feeling. I did rather the same when I lost my fiancé — long ago as that was now. It’s easy to run away from things you can’t change, but it’s also easy to lose important parts of yourself when you do so, Noboyuki-san. I learnt that when Ryoko came back into my life. Maybe you should take a lesson from it too, now your son is starting to branch out for himself.”

“Your fiancé?” Noboyuki shut the book with a snap, sending a cloud of dust up around them and causing the scientist to choke, wafting the haze away. “I didn’t know.”

“Well, it was a long time before you were born.” Washu said pensively. She shrugged her shoulders. “I wasn’t always a mad scientist who lived in a closet, you know. I did have a life, beyond my scientific prowess.”

“Can I ask what happened to him? You never married him?” Noboyuki asked keenly. Washu shook her head, a shadow flickering into her expression as she did so.

“He died, on Jurai.” She said softly. “While we were working there on some top secret research program.”

She fingered the pendant, then,

“He gave me this.” She added. “And I’ve always kept it. But I’ve always regretted that I couldn’t keep him, too. So I know how you feel about Achika-sama, Noboyuki-san. I understand what it’s like to lose



someone like that.”

She smiled, shrugging her shoulders as an impish expression lit up her green eyes.

“Which is why we both want the wedding of our children to go off without a hitch.” She added carelessly. “Isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is.” Noboyuki returned her smile, nodding his head. “I never imagined my son would be marrying an alien, but then again, you have to be broad-minded these days. And some of those alien women are very pretty. Heck, I suppose I half married one myself, when it comes to it. I’ve certainly nothing against my boy’s choice of paramour.”

“Well, I’m just hoping we manage to get through the ceremony with the house and shrine still in one piece.” Washu said frankly. “That Katsuhito offered his services worries me a little. I don’t know what kind of bride Ryoko will make, but I have my doubts that it will be like anything the Earth has ever seen before. I’ve heard concerning words like ‘traditional Japanese’ and ‘proper Earth wedding’ from her on a couple of occasions. I dread to think what her interpretation of those things might be.”

“Ah well. Children do keep you on your toes, so they say.” Noboyuki spread his hands. “What will be will be.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Washu sighed. “Okay. Then let’s see if we can’t find this album of yours, huh? If nothing else, maybe it will give Ryoko some idea of how an Earth bride is meant to behave — even if she hasn’t a hope in hell of doing it!”

“I can’t believe I’m really a full blown University graduate, now.”

Tenchi Masaki took a sip of his drink, setting the mug down on the table as he cast his companion an affectionate smile. “It all seems like yesterday that I even began college, and now...”

“And now you’re out there in the big bad world with only me to protect you from harm.” The booth’s other occupant returned his smile with an impish grin, reaching over to squeeze his fingers as she did so. “What would you do without me, Tenchi-kun? You’d be lost.”

“If you say so.” Tenchi looked amused. “But it is strange, Ryoko. Osaka has been a big part of my — well, of *our* lives for a while now. Hard to imagine that it’s all done and dusted.”

“Harder to imagine that Otousan’s friend needs his apartment back

for his daughter, when she returns from whatever weird study project she's been doing up north." Ryoko sighed, resting her chin on her hands as she looked pensive. "It might not be the biggest flat in the world, or the most glamorous either. But it's been our adventure into living together and it sucks that we have to lose it so suddenly. After this weekend, we won't have a place to come to in this city — not to sleep over and do naughty things without the risk of your father or my mother intruding on us. What's it going to be like when we finally do tie the knot, Tenchi? I don't know about the permanent chaperoning thing."

"Do you want to move to Osaka?" Tenchi looked startled. "I thought you liked staying in the mountains."

"Oh, I do, and I don't want to move." Ryoko shook her head. "It's just that it's nice having a secret hideaway where we can just spend time alone. You know? But I guess even with what the Japanese Government are paying us to 'liase' on their behalf with Jurai, it's not possible."

She looked amused.

"Even if all that entails is keeping us on good terms with them and making sure their mad Emperor doesn't want to invade our planet." She added. "They have no clue that Ayeka is really the one doing all the work — she's the reason Azusa doesn't even dare think about launching that kind of expedition, because she's far too fond of Earth and the people who live here. But if this planet wants to pay me for occasionally zipping across space and yelling at a few Juraians, then who am I to complain? It keeps me in sake, so I'm quite happy doing it."

Tenchi chuckled.

"I guess it is the perfect job for you, then." He teased. "And I suppose that now my school responsibilities really are over, they'll call on me to do a lot more of this 'mediation' stuff as well. It's strange really — how they seem to want to trust in Jurai's intentions, but really they're using you and I to make sure that nothing funny happens. Even though you're no Earth-born woman, they seem to trust you more than they do the Emperor of Jurai. Funny, isn't it? Once the universe's most notorious space criminal — and here you are, protecting the peace."

Ryoko snorted appreciatively, nodding her head.

"Like I said, the job works for me." She agreed. "I don't have to do much, they give me money, I get to use my spaceship without them

having seven fits about it. It's all good, as they say. I can live with it."

She frowned, tilting her head on one side as she took in her fiancé's features. Absently she remembered the first time they had met, and a smile touched her lips as she realised how far both of them had come since that day. They had both changed, she realised, him as much as her. But in the end, it had only served to bring them closer together.

Tenchi frowned, eying her keenly.

"Is something wrong?" He asked, concerned, and Ryoko pinkened, shaking her head.

"No... no." She assured him. "I was just thinking. That's all."

"Something must be wrong, then." Tenchi teased, and Ryoko pouted, kicking him beneath the table.

"That is no way to speak to your future wife, Mr Masaki!" She objected, though humour sparkled in her golden eyes. "Really, you have to learn to treat me with respect — after all, you *do* have the honour of marrying one of the most prestigious space criminals ever to ransack the universe. You might show a little appreciation."

Tenchi laughed.

"Consider me scolded." He said playfully, and Ryoko grinned.

"Well, just keep it in mind." She said lightly. "All right?"

"All right." Tenchi drained the last of his drink, offering her a smile. "So what was so important you spaced out on me? Joking aside, daydreaming really isn't like you at all."

"I know." Ryoko admitted. "But I suppose... well, it's just the fact that here I am, getting ready to marry you. And how many things have happened since I crashed to the Earth and this moment. How much we've both been through and that we've both changed a whole lot since then. Don't you think so? This would have seemed crazy to us both back then. Now it seems crazy to think we might not have been together. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I suppose I do." Tenchi agreed. "Guess it is some kind of fate that we are here now, as we are. I know they say that there's someone out there for everyone, but I didn't expect to be searching galaxies to find my future partner, that's for sure."

"And I never thought I'd wind up living on — or loving — a backwater planet like the Earth." Ryoko sighed pensively, getting to her feet as Tenchi pulled on his jacket. "And yet, here we are. There

was a time when this place would have bored me to death just thinking about it. But now I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. It's backwards and quaint and really strange, sometimes. But it's home, so I can forgive it all those things. And you know, the basics are quite good, when you come to it. The alcohol is readily available. You can spend the night on the town if you want to... and of course, there's you if I'm ever bored. Nope, all things considered, the Earth is all right."

"I'm glad you think so." Tenchi shot her an amused look as they left the coffee shop, stepping out into the bright Spring day. "As for Osaka and not coming here, well, maybe we will. Who knows? Or even further afield. We can take trips, have visits, do that kind of thing. They don't have to be interstellar, after all. And we do have friends here, too."

"You more than me." Ryoko acknowledged. "Some folk are still hung up over that nightclub business."

She pulled a face.

"Like it wasn't ages ago now, and not that it wasn't my fault, but you know people. They like to hang onto a juicy story."

"Yeah, I know." Tenchi agreed. "But on the whole, it's been all right — hasn't it? I mean, you obviously like Osaka, if you're going to miss spending time here."

"I do like Osaka." Ryoko said, an impish expression crossing her face. "We had a very special first in Osaka. Why would I not think of it fondly?"

Tenchi reddened at this, and Ryoko laughed, slipping her arm playfully into his.

"Oh, you are so easy to tease, Tenchi-kun." She said playfully. "Come on. We've time to shop before we head back to the apartment, and since this is our last weekend there, we should make the most of the time we have."

"All right, I suppose so." Tenchi agreed. "Although if your idea of shopping is trawling through the liquor stores, can we at least do the summarised version today? I know you can drink for Jurai if you want to, but some of us get blisters on our feet if we walk too far in one day."

"You're such a wimp, but I wasn't actually thinking of alcohol." Ryoko shrugged dismissively. "We'll get enough of that tonight, at your graduation party — unless you'd forgotten about that little

venture, of course. But I need something to wear. After all, I am your fiancée and I do deserve to look stunning, feminine and beautiful at this little college shindig of yours. Don't you think so? It's only right."

"I think I'm about to be conned into spending money." Tenchi eyed her ruefully, and Ryoko laughed.

"You might just be right, Tenchi-kun." She said amiably. "But at least you know it's all in a good cause, right? I mean, you do want me to make a good impression? After all, the last time I went to anything that involved more students than just Ikeda and Sakura was that unfortunate nightclub business itself. You do want people to remember me in a different light — don't you now?"

"All right, you win, I'm coming." Tenchi held up his hands. "Where do you want to begin?"

## Chapter 3

---

### Chapter Three

“Well, Spring is here at last.”

The tall, slender figure of the Crown Princess of Jurai stood at the balcony of her chamber, gazing out pensively across the landscape of her planet, a slight smile on her face. “The seasons seem to move so quickly these days, somehow.”

“Spring on Jurai isn’t exactly like Spring on Planet Earth, though.” The Princess’s companion said with a sigh, coming to join her at the railing. “New flowers bloom, but it’s not the same. Don’t you miss the melting snow and sweeping the blossoms from the Shrine steps, Ayeka-oneechan? I know I do.”

“Yes, of course.” Ayeka nodded her head slightly. “Actually, Sasami, I was thinking about the Earth as well. You’re right — there’s nothing quite as beautiful as seeing all those pretty pink blossoms fluttering to the ground.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling better, sister?” Sasami sent her companion a concerned look. “You’re sounding distracted — are you sure you should be up and around already?”

“I’m fine, Sasami.” Ayeka dismissed her sister’s concern with a flick of her fingers. “I’m quite rested, and ready to take on my duties again. No, I was thinking about the Earth for another reason. Uncle received communication from Ryo Ohki just yesterday morning — I suppose that you’ve already heard that now Tenchi has finished at his Earth college, he and Ryoko will be formalising their arrangement?”

“You mean they’re finally getting married?” Excitement flitted into Sasami’s expression, followed by concern. “Oh! Onee-sama...”

“Sasami, I’m fine.” Ayeka offered her sister a gentle smile. “Really, I am. I did worry how I’d feel when the news came — but to be honest, I’m happy. I think that I’ve finally conquered it inside of me — I can genuinely be happy for Tenchi and Ryoko when they make their promises. But the real reason I was thinking about it was that I gave Tenchi my word when he told me about his betrothal that I would do my best to attend their wedding. Since it seems to be imminent, I was wondering what chance I had of getting some time away from Jurai — and seeing Earth’s spring again, after so long away. Jurai and Earth

are friends now — after all. There shouldn't be a political risk to us going to visit allies on such a significant mission — don't you think so?"

"Oh!" Sasami's eyes became big. "*Could* we go? Ayeka-oneechan, do you think that Uncle..? And well, do you think Tenchi and Ryoko would want me...?"

"Of course they would, you silly girl." Ayeka laughed. "Ryo Ohki's message pretty much said as much."

"So Ryoko invited us to the Earth?" Sasami demanded. Ayeka shook her head.

"Washu sent the message... apparently Ryoko and Tenchi are away from the mountains and left Ryo Ohki with her for safe-keeping whilst they pack up whatever belongings they have in the city." She replied thoughtfully. "Ryoko was afraid she might get put into a box by mistake."

Sasami giggled.

"Poor Ryo Ohki." She said appreciatively. "She does like to get into everything. Ryoko is probably right."

She gazed up at her sister, squeezing her by the hand.

"And if Uncle says we can, are we really going to go to the Earth?"

"Yes." Ayeka nodded her head. "I want to keep my word to Lord Tenchi, and it's been a long time since we paid a visit."

"But are you sure you're well enough? I mean, Ayeka, you did collapse in the middle of the Council session yesterday." Sasami bit her lip. "You fell headlong — are you sure you should be thinking about rushing across the universe on a whim? You know Father almost had a heart attack on the spot — he might not want you haring all over the place if he thinks your health is suspect. You know how protective of us he still can be, even now."

"I told you, Sasami-chan. I'm quite well." Ayeka gripped her sister gently by the hands, meeting her gaze with a serious one of her own. "And this is important to me, just as it is to you. So don't worry. I will be fine... you know that I'm not weak."

"I know." Sasami sighed. "I just... Tsunami..."

She faltered, turning her gaze back towards the landscape, and Ayeka frowned, following her gaze towards the clearing where Tsunami's stone shrine was in the process of being renovated.

“What about Tsunami?” She asked softly. “Do you think she won’t let you leave?”

“No, it’s not that.” Sasami shook her head. “I think she’d understand. Just, she has me worried about you, that’s all.”

“About me?” Ayeka looked startled. “Why on earth?”

“Well, I don’t think she thinks you’re as well or as strong as you think you are.” Sasami pursed her lips. “She won’t tell me exactly what she means, but still. She’s worried about you and so am I. You still are very pale.”

“You worry far too much.” Ayeka grinned, hugging her sister tightly. “Although I’m glad that you do.”

“Perhaps.” Sasami acknowledged. “What about Takeru? Will he come with us, if we go?”

“Yes, if Uncle can spare him.” Ayeka agreed. “He is my husband — it would be wrong to omit him from the invitation.”

“And you’d miss him.” Sasami said astutely. Ayeka blushed, nodding her head.

“I would.” She agreed slowly. “It’s strange how things can change, you know. But since the business with Yugi, and your experiences on Yousai, he and I have been closer than ever. I think... no, I know now that my feelings for him have changed over the course of the last year. He’s more than my consort, now — he’s someone I trust and have faith in.”

She clasped her slim fingers together, gazing dreamily out across the landscape of her planet as she did so.

“I won’t pretend to you that I’ve stopped loving Tenchi. You know me too well to be deceived, and I don’t suppose I ever will stop, not fully. He’s very special to me and he always will hold that place in my heart.”

“But you just said...” Sasami looked bewildered, and Ayeka nodded, a faint gravity entering her ruby eyes.

“I’ve realised that I have to put it to one side and move on.” She said simply. “Things Ryoko said to me, when Yugi was manipulating me... they stuck in my mind and I’ve thought of them more and more as time has gone on. I do care for Takeru, and something else... I realised that, whatever happens, Tenchi is always going to chase after Ryoko. When she’s in danger, it’s her that’s in his heart and his mind. Not me. In a way, that was the most difficult thing to face. Even when



he came to Jurai to rescue me from Kagato, he was still thinking of her. And he still left, even though he could have stayed here and had everything. Even if Ryoko had died then, he would still not have loved me.”

She sighed.

“Not in that way, anyway.” She amended. “And that led me to another realisation. That even if we had wed, we wouldn’t have been well suited. We might even have been unhappy. Because if Tenchi can love a woman like Ryoko — he could never love a woman like me. We are too different. We would have been in conflict.”

“It all seems complicated to me, Nee-chan.” Sasami said reflectively. “Are all adult relationships that messed up? Because I’ve got another four years to go before I think about betrothals. And I don’t want to be caught up in all of this kind of stuff if I can help it.”

“I guess I don’t know.” Ayeka looked amused. “But it’s not easy to be a Princess and have a free heart, Sasami-chan. I’ve actually come to see that more and more in recent years. But I’m also aware that by being Tenchi’s close friend, I have the best chance of keeping him in my life. That will satisfy me. When I’ve been in trouble, after all, Tenchi has been around. But it is not him constantly at my side when there is a crisis on Jurai. It’s Takeru... and I’m coming to appreciate that more and more. That not all great wedding matches are borne out of passion or fancy, but reliability.”

“You don’t think Tenchi’s reliable, then?” Sasami blinked.

“Sasami, he’s marrying a Space Pirate.” Ayeka said wryly. “Good as his heart is, I don’t think he’s cut out for the kind of world you and I deal with on a daily basis. Do you? Could you imagine Father’s face if I’d asked to wed a notorious space criminal?”

“Yes.” Sasami’s crimson eyes lit up with humour. “I guess he wouldn’t like it too much.”

“Exactly.” Ayeka laughed. “So it’s all right. I’ve come to decide that I’ve done the right thing — the best thing — for me and for Jurai. I’ll take Takeru as mine, and care for him as much as I ever can. I do love him, even if it’s not quite the same kind of love. It’s a love I can depend on, when I need it. And I will need it, as time goes on. So it’s all all right. But in a way that is another reason to go to Earth. To test my own convictions, if you like. Discover how I really do feel.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” Sasami seemed to be considering this carefully. “I hope Uncle says we can fly. I’d like to see everyone and

it'd be so much fun, to go to their wedding and see what an Earth wedding is really like."

"With Ryoko involved, I doubt that it'll be your average Earth wedding." Ayeka said ruefully. "But yes, I agree. It will be a nice holiday for the both of us."

She paused, eying her sister pensively for a moment.

"Perhaps Kamidake would like to accompany us, also." She said lightly, watching her sister's expression carefully as she did so. "After all, we can't travel with no security, can we? The Earth might be Jurai's allies, but there's no sense in taking risks — after all, it's still very new to all of them and I'm sure they'd be more nervous, if we showed up for the wedding with an armed guard in tow. Since you gave Kamidake and Azaka back elements of Tsunami's magic, he should be more than good enough — and less imposing on any jittery Earth officials who happen to wonder why we're landing there all of a sudden."

Sasami did not answer, but her pink cheeks told Ayeka all she wanted to know, and she laughed, squeezing her sister's hand affectionately.

"I had my suspicions about that." She murmured, more to herself than to her companion, though Sasami glanced up at her words, her gaze full of consternation. "Even if it is four years before Father will officially allow you to become betrothed. It's nice to know that I do still know you as well as I thought, Sasami-chan. Even as you grow up."

"What do you mean, suspicions?" Sasami asked apprehensively. "About what, Onee-chan?"

"Oh, Sasami." Ayeka looked amused, leading her companion away from the balcony and indicating for her to sit down on the end of her bed. Sasami did as she was bidden, and Ayeka followed suit, leaning up against the wooden bedhead as she eyed her sister carefully. Sasami, she realised, was no longer the small girl she had been when they had first visited the Earth. She had grown, it was true, but in more than just stature, and the previous month she had abandoned her two bouncing tails of hair permanently for a more grown up style, thick waves clasped neatly at the base of her neck. She still had the cheeky, upturned nose and dancing eyes that had attracted so many people to secure her friendship, but the gentle flush of colour in her cheeks told Ayeka that her sister's thoughts were not all those of a child any longer. At fourteen, Sasami was blossoming into a young

adult, and Ayeka's expression softened.

"You are going to be very beautiful, when you are grown." She said gently. Sasami looked startled, the colour fading from her cheeks as she eyed her sister in confusion.

"Ayeka?"

"There will be many men who will clamour for your attentions. I hope you realise that."

"I'm not looking for any man, Ayeka. I'm fourteen. I don't want to get married or do any of that stuff yet."

Sasami shook her head, but there was an unsettled expression in her crimson eyes, and Ayeka squeezed her sister's hand reassuringly.

"It's quite all right. You can trust me." She said softly. "You have feelings for Kamidake, don't you, my sister?"

Sasami stared at her, stricken, and Ayeka smiled.

"I've seen it for a while, but I wondered if you'd trust me enough to tell me." She added. "First love is always very special, isn't it, Sasami-chan?"

Sasami reddened, burying her head in her hands to hide her flushed cheeks from view, and Ayeka laughed, hugging her sister gently.

"So I am right."

"Yes." Sasami admitted, raising her gaze to her companion's. "But I don't know how Father or Uncle would take it, Onee-chan. So I'm not saying anything yet. Even he doesn't know about it... I don't know how I'd even tell him. I don't know how he might react, and, well, I'm only fourteen. I'm not ready to involve myself in that kind of world yet."

"Yes, I can see that." Ayeka pursed her lips, contemplating. "It's funny... Takeru asked me some months ago if I knew of anyone who might have claimed your heart. It took me aback that you might even have those kinds of thoughts, but I realise that you're less of a child than people think, sometimes. I don't know what possessed him to ask me — something obviously put the idea into his head, but he has never said exactly what. And so I decided to pay closer attention to you, my sister... I was surprised by the things I saw."

"You're really not mad at me?" Sasami asked apprehensively. "I know that this whole being a Princess thing makes it complicated. But I can't help it. I think it was Tsunami's fault in the beginning — she

chose him, after all. But it's really not about that — at least, I don't think so. I'm a bit muddled. I just... I don't want to do anything at the moment. Or tell anyone, really. I just want to see... how things go."

"I'm not mad at you." Ayeka shook her head. "Kamidake is one of the few men at this court who is deserving of a Princess's affection."

She pulled a face.

"Had it been someone like Jun Hirata, I might be choosing different words." She added. "But whatever his station, Kamidake is a man of courage and honour. Yes, you could choose worse."

Sasami was silent for a moment, then,

"I've felt like this for a while." She admitted. "Since Tsunami had control of my body flying to Kihaku, but maybe even before. She just... clarified it into something else, when she was in command. And since then..." She faltered, shrugging.

"I don't think I'm going to stop feeling it." She said finally. "What if I don't?"

"Do you think that he'd reject you?"

"I... I don't know." Sasami sighed. "And worse, Uncle and Father might not understand, Ayeka-oneechan. I was afraid that, well, even you might not. So I haven't really told anyone at all — not even Suki. I didn't know what people might think. I don't consider Kamidake beneath me, but I am anxious that he might not feel... feel the same. And it's so complicated. So I've sort of left it alone, for now. I'm too young — it gives me a headache worrying about it."

"There's nothing that hurts so much than telling someone you love them if they don't feel it in return." Ayeka mused absently. She smiled, shaking her head. "But I don't think that you need worry yourself about that just yet. As you said, you're only fourteen. Things might change. And if they don't, and you still feel this way, well, you should follow your heart and try not to worry about what people might think. I want you to be happy, whatever you choose to do, so you won't find any opposition with me."

"Ayeka." Sasami flung her arms around her sister, hugging her tightly. "Thank you for understanding. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, only... well, I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Ayeka assured her. "And if we do go to the Earth, Sasami-chan, I will ask Uncle for Kamidake specifically. All right?"

"Yes." Sasami raised shining eyes to her companion, and Ayeka

smiled.

“Then it’s settled and I will address the matter with Uncle first thing in the morning, before session begins.” She said softly.

“You still are very pale, my sister.” Sasami observed. Ayeka looked rueful, shrugging her shoulders.

“Well, I’ll just have to be pale.” She said frankly. “And with any luck, Tenchi and Ryoko will set a date soon. Who knows — maybe some long distance space travel is exactly what I need!”

“Wow. They really have gone all out tonight.”

Ryoko gazed around the huge hotel reception room with a grin of approval, sliding her arm through Tenchi’s as they made their way into the centre of the decked out chamber. “Either they’re really proud of you all, or they’re sick of you and want to give you a good send off.”

“Either is possible, considering.” Tenchi looked rueful. “But you’re right. It is something else.”

“So you see, I told you that spending money on an outfit wouldn’t be a waste.” Ryoko eyed him mischievously. “Now I look pretty and the room looks pretty and I guess you’ll do, also. We’re all set for a great night out, don’t you think? Just point me in the direction of the bar, and everything will be perfect.”

“You can’t want to drink already, Ryoko?”

A fresh voice interrupted their conversation, preventing Tenchi from responding, and as the couple turned, a smile touched the pirate’s features.

“Hi, Sakura.” She said warmly. “And sure... these things are nothing without a little tittle here and there. Don’t you know me better than that yet?”

“I know you can drink most people under the table.” Sakura Ito exchanged amused glances with Tenchi, then shrugged. “But everyone else will want something to drink, so ration yourself, huh?”

“I suppose so.” Ryoko sighed, pursing her lips.

“I’m glad to see familiar faces, actually.” Sakura admitted. “Or at least, friendly ones. Hiroshi is nowhere to be found and I’m not sure if he’s even going to turn up. I was worried you two might have blown it off, too — after all, isn’t that guy kicking you out of the apartment

this week?"

"Tomorrow, officially." Tenchi agreed. "But we'll still come to Osaka from time to time, I think."

"That's good to know." Sakura dimpled, casting a glance from one to the other. "Since I'm definitely going to be around these parts. I got a job lined up at one of the design places in the centre, so I've actually been apartment hunting myself this last week or two. Nothing yet, but I am going to be staying in Osaka for sure. Tomorrow I've got a bunch to go look at, so wish me luck — this job is a really good one and I want it to work out."

"Congrats." Tenchi grinned. "I know you were looking for one nearby, so I'm glad you nailed it."

"Yes, but commuting from my parents' house would be a drag, so hopefully this place I'm looking at tomorrow will be all right." Sakura grimaced. "It's not that expensive, so it will be tiny — but I've noone to share with, so it'll have to be that way."

"Did you come to this thing alone, this evening?" Ryoko asked quizzically at that point, and Sakura pinkened, nodding her head.

"You don't have to have a date." She defended herself. "And I didn't, so..."

"Oh, I know that." Ryoko shrugged her shoulders. "I just wondered. That's all."

She grinned.

"It is more fun, with a date." She added. "There are so many more after-party possibilities that way."

"Ryoko!" Hot colour flooded through Tenchi's features at this, and Sakura laughed.

"You two are funny." She said, amused. "I'm going to miss you always being around, so make sure you do come visit me sometimes, okay? I'd hate to lose touch with people, just because college is done."

"Speaking of losing touch, here's the missing link in the chain." Ryoko jerked her head towards the door, and Tenchi turned, seeing his other closest college friend Hiroshi Ikeda entering the hotel room. His eyes were bright with anticipation and energy behind his glasses, and he was not alone. Tenchi's eyebrows shot up, and he cast Ryoko a doubtful glance.

"Does he actually have a date?" He asked hesitantly, and Ryoko

turned to see, pursing her lips.

“Looks that way.” She agreed. “Do you think she knows what she’s getting into?”

“Ikeda has a date?” Sakura blinked. “Since when?”

“I guess there must be a good escort agency somewhere in this city.” Ryoko smirked, and Tenchi shook his head.

“That’s mean, Ryoko-chan.” He chided. “It’s nice, if he has found himself someone at last.”

“This is the guy who asks you questions about what aliens do in the bedroom. Loudly, and in public.” Ryoko reminded him. “I know he’s probably your best friend, Tenchi, but he isn’t exactly subtle in his pursuit of the opposite sex.”

“Well, I suppose stranger things have happened.” Sakura observed with a shrug. “He’s coming this way, so shut up, the both of you.”

“Masaki-kun!” Hiroshi raised his hand in a greeting, bowing his head mock-formally in Ryoko’s direction as he did so. “Ryoko-san, Sakura... you all made it safely through the paparazzi outside, then?”

“They’re not paparazzi. They’re taking souvenir photos, and yes.” Tenchi nodded. “Who’s your companion, Hiroshi? Will you introduce us?”

“This is Mayume.” Hiroshi smiled, indicating his friend, who bowed her head, offering a pretty smile. “Mayume, these are my college friends Sakura Ito and Tenchi Masaki — and Tenchi’s girlfriend, Ryoko.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Mayume’s smile widened. She spoke in low, sweet tones, and glancing at her, Tenchi guessed she was about the same age as he was. He returned the smile.

“Likewise, Mayume-san.” He agreed. “We were heading to find a drink — are you two going to join us?”

“Why not?” Hiroshi nodded his head. “Mayume, are you thirsty?”

“That would be nice.” Mayume agreed.

“Then we’ll go.” Ryoko’s eyes sparkled. “Can’t start the party without a drink or two — Ikeda, did you see where the bar is, on your way in?”

“I might have known that’s where your mind would be.” Hiroshi grinned at her. “Yes, I did. It’s through this way. Follow me, all —

Ikeda to the rescue, as ever.”

“Someone’s full of themselves tonight.” Sakura muttered, and Tenchi cast her a smile.

“Impressing the ladies isn’t an easy job.” He bantered back. “But she seems nice enough. Don’t you think?”

“Sure, if you like that vacuum-packed beauty look.” Sakura shrugged carelessly. “I’m just trying to work out how a guy like Hiroshi picked up a girl that pretty. That’s all.”

“Shh. He’ll hear you.” Tenchi chided. Sakura looked rueful.

“True.” She admitted. “I’m sorry... it sounds like sour grapes, doesn’t it? Because I don’t have a date and even he does? But honestly, Tenchi, you know that he’s a complete fool where women are concerned. I’m his friend — I just don’t want him to get messed around, that’s all.”

“I’m sure Hiroshi can take care of himself.” Tenchi said firmly. “And hey, you said the same thing about me... you worried about my choice in women, for a while there. And I did all right — didn’t I?”

“I still worry about you, sometimes.” Sakura’s eyes lit up with amusement. “I’m fond of Ryoko, you know that. She’s the weirdest friend I’ve ever had, but it works for her. Whether or not you can really handle her, though — well, I don’t know. Sometimes I think she’s still too much for you, even now.”

“Perhaps, but it keeps life exciting.” Tenchi’s eyes twinkled.

“Are you seriously setting a date now? I mean, you said that you would when graduation was past... and now it is.” Sakura eyed him quizzically, and Tenchi nodded, his gaze flitting across to where his fiancée was ordering her drink, settling herself comfortably on the bar stool as did so.

“That’s the plan.” He agreed. “You and Ikeda will be invited, if that’s what you want to know. In fact, you might even be able to help out with the whole deal. Ryoko doesn’t know a lot about Earth weddings, and I’m not exactly someone she can ask. Mother is no longer around, and Washu isn’t exactly clued up on things like that. But I know your sister got married not so long ago, and so you must know more than I do about the whole thing. If you’d be willing, I know Ryoko could use your help.”

“Oh, for sure. If she wants.” Sakura nodded her head. “Weddings are so romantic — I’ll help out any way I can.”



"I knew I could count on you." Tenchi looked relieved. "Thanks, Sakura. I owe you one. With the way things are, the ceremony is likely to be at short notice — so anything you can do will be great."

"I suppose when you live at your own shrine complex, you have that luxury." Sakura mused. "Don't worry, Tenchi... you can rely on me."

"Hey, Tenchi! Sakura! Aren't you coming to join us?" Ryoko called out at that moment, and Tenchi nodded, casting his fiancée a warm smile.

"I was just asking Sakura if she'd help out regarding the wedding." He told her as he climbed up on the bar stool beside her. "You know, in terms of all the bridal stuff. She probably knows more than I or Washu do, after all."

"It's no problem." Sakura assured her. "If you want, Ryoko, I'll help you out."

"Sure." Ryoko grinned. "Thanks, Sakura. Earth traditions still aren't my specialty, even after all this time."

"Earth...?" Mayume's eyes widened, and she stared at Ryoko as if seeing her for the first time. "Are you... one of those... people from, you know, up there?"

Her gaze flitted upwards, and Ryoko offered her a playful smile, draining the last of her drink and indicating to the bartender that she wanted a refill. She nodded her head.

"Fraid so." She agreed, her expression unrepentant. "Sorry, didn't Hiroshi tell you? We're a very eclectic group of people, all things being equal."

"Ryoko works as a liaison between Earth and the planet Jurai. She's on our side." Sakura explained. "Her quirks take a bit of getting used to — but she's quite safe to be around, really."

"Wow... a real live alien." Mayume seemed stunned. "I didn't realise."

"That's me." Ryoko nodded. "But Sakura's right. So long as you don't annoy me or try and kill my man, I'm perfectly house-trained."

"That is a matter of opinion." Tenchi sent her a teasing look, and Ryoko poked out her tongue at him.

"Didn't I already tell you that there are ways in which to treat beautiful women?" She bantered. "Especially ones you intend to

marry, Tenchi-kun! Shame on you!”

Hiroshi chuckled.

“Those two are always like this.” He told his date with a shrug. “I guess it’s just so normal now I didn’t even think about it.”

“Normal?” Mayume stared at him. “Okay. If you say so.”

“Yo, Masaki!”

Before Tenchi could comment, someone from the crowd beyond called his name and he turned, a frown touching his expression as he recognised the speaker.

“Kyoda-san. Kamikura-san.” He said quietly. “Hi there... how are you enjoying the party?”

“Just fine, actually.” Kane Kyoda offered him a smile. “You?”

“We’re working our way through the alcohol quota.” Ryoko observed smoothly, her gaze flitting between the two former classmates as she spoke. “Evening, boys. Nice outfits.”

Kane glanced at her, the smile freezing on his lips as he registered her presence for the first time. He raised an eyebrow.

“Masaki — you brought *her* here?”

“Well, of course I did.” Tenchi looked confused. “Why wouldn’t I? Ryoko’s my fiancée, Kyoda. You know that.”

“Fiancée, huh?” Kane’s companion, Wataru Kamikura pursed his lips, eying Ryoko carefully for a moment, then shaking his head.

“You know, I still don’t get it, even now. After the last time you brought her to one of our get-togethers... Masaki, I’m all for freedom of choice, but we don’t want the whole hotel falling down around our ears. And well, you know what she... did the last time.”

“Saved a lot of people’s lives.” Sakura said angrily, before Tenchi could respond. “If the two of you are just going to snipe at Ryoko and Tenchi, you might as well go and do it somewhere else. Tenchi-kun is entitled to bring a date tonight, just like anyone else. If he chooses to bring Ryoko, that’s none of your business. She’s never hurt any of us, and you’ve no right to suggest that she did.”

“I’m sure the owners of a certain nightclub in the city beg to differ.” Kane said quietly, and Tenchi frowned.

“That wasn’t Ryoko’s fault, and you know it.” He said quietly. Kane shook his head.

“What I know is that that girl... if she is a girl... flew out of a burning building like some phoenix from the ashes, as the place crumbled around her.” He said softly. “And that there’s nothing left of that club now, after she treated it to her own particular brand of... shall we say... celebration?”

“Kyoda, lay off.” Hiroshi began, but Ryoko held up her hands, shaking her head.

“Do you have an issue with me, Kyoda-san?” She asked quietly. “Because if you do, address it to me directly — not through my fiancé as if you’re afraid to even meet my gaze.”

“I haven’t anything to say to someone who blows up buildings for fun.” Kane said frankly. “Come on, Kamikura. Let’s leave them to it.”

With that he grabbed his friend by the shoulder, pulling him away across the floor and Tenchi grimaced, turning to meet Ryoko’s gaze.

“I’m sorry about them, Ryoko-chan.” He said gently. “Even now they don’t understand what happened at the nightclub that evening.”

“Well, people like them probably don’t care, so long as they have someone to blame.” Ryoko shrugged. “Don’t sweat it, Tenchi. I can deal with a couple of idiots hating my guts from a distance. They’re not important — forget them.”

“Kyoda and Kamikura have had chips on their shoulders ever since Earth started opening it’s atmosphere to visitors.” Sakura said with a sigh. “They really have no clue. We know that the person responsible for the nightclub fire was Seiryō Tennan when he came looking for Tenchi, not you, Ryoko. And we know that if you hadn’t intervened and given away who you were by using your gifts, a lot of people would have been hurt. They’re just idiots and they’re scared of you. That’s all.”

“Gifts?” Mayume looked nervous. “What... I mean... what kind of... what are you...?”

“Ryoko can fly.” Hiroshi said calmly. “And you know, walk through walls, and teleport, and stuff. And blow things up, if she really wants to — although not when she’s hanging with us, because it’s anti-social.”

“The teleport thing is useful.” Sakura observed. “Especially if you’re running late or you can’t find enough yen for the train.”

“Tele...” Mayume swallowed, and Ryoko grinned.

“I’m a girl of hidden talents.” She said playfully. “But not everyone

can deal with an alien in their midst.”

“Mayume, you’re not going to be funny about Ryoko, are you?” Sakura asked pointedly. Mayume looked blank, then shook her head.

“No, I’m fine.” She said, seemingly recovering her composure. “I just didn’t expect... well, I had no idea coming to Hiroshi’s graduation party would be quite so... unusual.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Ryoko said decidedly. “Except my glass is empty again.”

“Are you going to spend the whole night at the bar, Ryoko-chan?” Tenchi teased. Ryoko raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’ve seen you dance.” She said bluntly. “I think I’m safer here.”

Sakura laughed, even as Tenchi looked embarrassed.

“She has you there, Tenchi-kun.” She observed. “Dancing really isn’t your talent.”

“No, but mingling a little might be nice. Seeing the hall and everyone.” Tenchi got a grip on his composure. “Maybe we could come back here after?”

“All right, all right.” Ryoko got to her feet. “I’m coming. The things I do for love, huh? But I warn you — any hint of dancing and you can forget it. I have way too much rhythm to fall in with whatever it is you call steps.”

“Deal.” Tenchi looked relieved. “Sakura? Ikeda, Mayume-san? Are you coming?”

“Mayume and I will stay here a while, I think.” Hiroshi shot his date a thoughtful look. “Mayume hasn’t finished her drink.”

“Sakura?”

“I’ll come with, if you don’t think I’m playing date-crasher.” Sakura got to her feet.

“In this place, there’s no such thing as date-crashing.” Ryoko looked rueful. “It’s not exactly designed for private romantic moments — I think you’re okay.”

“You know, there are a lot of people here I don’t even know.” Tenchi remarked, as they moved through the crowd. “Weird, isn’t it? You go to school with folk for however many years and yet...”

“They all know you, though.” Sakura reminded him. “The boy who was kidnapped by one alien and who’s living with another. That

makes you stand out.”

“What would they say, then, if they knew that Tenchi was a good part alien himself?” Ryoko looked mischievous. “Besides, if you want to be technical about it, Tenchi lives with more than just me. Back home in the mountains there’s his Grandfather — he was a Juraian Prince, don’t forget. My mad Kii mother... my spaceship Ryo Ohki, and Yume, the robot-turned-housekeeper who insists on squatting with us. It’s a regular alien central.”

“True.” Sakura looked rueful. “But I doubt most of the alumni here realise that. And you know, having seen your other lifestyle for myself, I figure it might be safer that way.”

“Possibly.” Tenchi rubbed his chin pensively. “Washu is engrossed in trying to expand the house inter-dimensionally without cracking the foundations at present... you might have a point. Our house has been through the wars since she first came to stay with us.”

“It’s been to Jurai and back, once.” Ryoko laughed. “I think it can take a few dimensional twiddlings.”

“You took your *house* to Jurai?” Sakura stared, and Tenchi nodded.

“Once.” He agreed. “It... well, it’s a long story.”

“I won’t ask.” Sakura raised her eyes skywards. “Your life is really too, too weird, Tenchi-kun.”

“But weird is fun.” Ryoko reflected, then she frowned. “Oh, dammit!”

“Damn what?” Tenchi looked startled. “What’s wrong, Ryoko? Something happen?”

“I left my purse at the bar.” Ryoko grimaced. “I guess I’d better go back and get it.”

“Someone will have handed it in, or Hiroshi might have noticed.” Tenchi pointed out. “I’m sure it’ll be fine — you weren’t carrying that much money with you, were you?”

“No, but Tenchi, Achika’s ring is inside.” Ryoko admitted. “I took it off in case of losing it while we were here, but I wanted it with me anyway. So...”

“Oh, I see.” Tenchi’s expression became one of understanding. “All right, then. But Ryoko, don’t teleport over to find it, huh? It might freak people out.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Ryoko shook her head. “Give me some credit,

will you? I'm not using my magic this evening."

"Good." Tenchi looked relieved.

"Shall I come help you look?" Sakura offered. "It might have slipped down, and two sets of eyes are better than one."

"Okay, thanks." Ryoko grinned. "Tenchi, we'll see you in a few moments, all right? I'm sure it will be right where I left it, and if it isn't, well, I'm sure I'll track down what's happened to it. Noone is going to get their hands on my ring, after all."

"Sure. But don't scare anyone." Tenchi warned. "I doubt anyone will try and steal it, so ask questions before you explode."

"Promise." Ryoko agreed. "Back in a few!"

As he watched his fiancée disappear into the crowd, Sakura in tow, Tenchi leant up against the wall, folding his arms idly across his chest as he settled to wait.

At least, he mused, with Sakura for company, Ryoko was less likely to do something impulsive or crazy to get hold of her purse.

"Which is a good thing." He murmured. "The last thing we want is her accidentally causing a scene."

"Masaki... all alone, now?"

Wataru Kamikura's voice startled him and he turned, casting his former friend a wary smile. He nodded.

"Ryoko left something at the bar." He agreed levelly. "That's all."

"Do you really think it's safe to let her out of your sight?" Kane asked doubtfully. "Tenchi, I know that you think you love this girl, but you have to see that she's only a few inches shy of psychosis. Whatever did happen at that club — do you really think you're safe with someone who can blow things up just by looking at them?"

"She can't do that, you're exaggerating." Tenchi's brows drew together as he contemplated his companion's words. "Look, I don't know what you want — whether you think you're looking out for me, or what. But Ryoko isn't a threat to anyone here. She's not going to hurt anybody. She just wants to be accepted, that's all. And I happen to love her very much. Whatever you see when you look at her, I see a girl who means a lot to me. Can't you just accept that? Noone's asking *you* to marry her, after all."

"Did you ever stop to consider the idea that she might be biding her time?" Wataru asked softly. "Tenchi, you've always been a dope. We

all know that. A well meaning dope, true, but a dope nonetheless. Women and you — not generally on the same level. And yes, she's very pretty. But how do you know what she's really planning? With all those powers of hers — how do you know that all this liason with Jurai business is above board? How do you know she's not an advance party for an invasion?"

"Ryoko isn't Juraian, so that doesn't quite work out." Tenchi said stiffly.

"Not what I heard." Kane shook his head. "I thought she was some relation of this Jurai family who keep interfering in Earth politics."

"This is really none of your business." Tenchi shook his head, turning to move away, but Kane grabbed him by the wrist.

"Listen to me, Masaki." He said urgently. "We know you were sucked up into one of their ships, and who knows what they did to your brain? But you have to snap out of it. The whole planet could be in danger and you're encouraging it! If one alien can settle here, more can come. Don't you realise that? This planet is going to wind up enslaved by one of these big gun powers we keep hearing about on the news. Don't you worry about that? When you think what that girl can do — what if more of her come to the Earth? We wouldn't stand a chance. How can you just stand there and let it happen?"

"Ryoko is not here to hurt anyone." Tenchi wrenched his arm free from his companion's grip, glaring at him as he did so. "And if you opened your eyes and your mind you'd know that. If you bothered to see the Osaka fire in the way most people do, you'd know that her forcefields protected people from falling masonry and she gave away who she really was in order to protect innocent people who live here. You among them... don't you get that? Ryoko loves the Earth — this is her home. And whether you like it or not, she's staying. With me. Where she belongs."

"You really are warped, you know that?" Wataru said frankly. "Shacking up with some alien because no Earth girl is interested."

"I'm not looking for an Earth girl." Tenchi snapped.

"Well, maybe you should be. There are plenty to go around." Kane said philosophically. "And most of them don't cause massive explosions whenever they're in the vicinity. That girl is a freak of nature, true enough, and they should have sent her back to whatever world she did crawl out of. Wherever it was, it wasn't here, and no matter how much you try and integrate her, it won't work. You can marry her as many times as you like, but she'll still be alien scum and

she'll still be looked on as a lower form of life by anyone on this planet with any sense of logic. If the Government had any sense, they'd have taken her and exterminated her already — show these alien people what will happen to them, if they dare send more like her to this Earth."

This was too much for even Tenchi's composure and he grabbed his companion by the collar of his shirt, pushing him up against the wall of the hotel chamber as rage coursed through his veins.

"Take that back!" He demanded. "What you just said — take it back!"

"Why, am I hitting too close to the truth?" Kane raised an eyebrow. "You know it as well as I do, Tenchi. Your girlfriend is a freak and freaks like that should be taken out, before they hurt this world beyond all help."

Thwack!

Before Tenchi knew what he was doing, he had landed his fist square across Kane's jaw. Oblivious to the gasps or the gathering crowd that had begun to encircle their dispute, he tossed his foe down against the wall, glaring at him as Kane struggled to his feet.

"I warned you." He said darkly. "You leave Ryoko alone! You have no idea of the things she's been through, or the sacrifices she's made to keep this world safe in the past. You have truly no idea of anything, so keep your mouth shut."

"You shouldn't have done that, Masaki." Anger glinted in Kane's eyes as he recovered himself, balling his own fists. "You want to fight over it? Fine. I'll fight you. Whatever the aliens did to your brain, they warped it. If you can even imagine that girl has anything positive about her..."

"Do you want me to hit you again?"

"Oh, I promise you, you aren't getting another chance." Kane swung in Tenchi's direction, and the Prince only just managed to duck out of the way of the blow, sidestepping it and regaining his composure. "Stand still, you coward. You need all the sense knocked into you that I can manage."

"Why, you..."

"Stop this!"

Ryoko's voice startled Tenchi back to himself, and he faltered, dropping his fists as the anger flooded out of him. Kane took



advantage of his moment of hesitation, swinging for him again, but Ryoko was too quick for him and a glittering amber forcefield shot up between the two men, Kane's blow glancing harmlessly off it as he fell backwards.

"I said *stop*." Ryoko's eyes were dark with anger, and the forcefield flickered and faded as she turned her gaze on Tenchi. He stared at her uncomprehendingly, taking in the expression on her face.

"What in hell are you doing?" She asked softly. "Can't I leave you alone for ten seconds?"

"He..." Tenchi faltered, his cheeks burning as he realised where he was and what he had done. He cast Kane a troubled glance, taking in the blood that coloured his foe's lip, and he swallowed hard, glancing at his fists.

"He what?" Ryoko pressed.

"He said something that upset me. Something about you." Tenchi admitted, and Ryoko sighed, shaking her head.

"I told you, I don't care what he thinks of me. Him or anyone." She said reproachfully. "And it was you who told *me* not to cause trouble here tonight. You could follow your own advice."

She turned her attention to Kane, holding out a hand to haul him to his feet. Once upright, he wrenched his arm away, glaring at her with a mixture of fear and suspicion, and Ryoko pursed her lips.

"Stay away from us." She said quietly. "Else next time it won't be Tenchi who swings for you, all right? I can fight my own battles... and if you threaten his safety again, I will be fighting his too. Do you understand me? I don't want trouble, but if you cause it, I *will* be there to intervene."

Before the stunned Kane could react, Ryoko had taken Tenchi firmly by the arm, dragging him through the crowd of bemused people and out towards the door of the hotel chamber. Once out of sight of the crowd, she gripped him more tightly, teleporting the both of them to the grounds outside.

"Right." She said, as Tenchi struggled to bring his swirling thoughts back into order. "Now you can tell me what he said that upset you so badly."

"He said you were a freak and that the Government should have terminated you when they had a chance." Now that his temper had calmed, Tenchi was rapidly beginning to realise the nature of his

actions, and he bit his lip, eying his fiancée guiltily. “I’m sorry. I feel a hypocrite, now... thank you for interfering.”

“Much as I’d like to see you kick his butt, I’d rather you didn’t do it in a public place, where people are always going to associate us with trouble.” Ryoko sighed. “This world means a lot to me, Tenchi. I want to stay. And I don’t want people here to have any more reason to fear me than they already do.”

She touched his cheek gently.

“I love you, and I’m proud that you would defend me so readily.” She added softly. “It means the world to me that you care that much. But staying here is important, too. And having a future together where we’re not molested or feared or hated. You know that your grandfather would say the same — that it will take time for Earth to get used to the idea of its new connections. We just have to sit it out. There will always be people who doubt, you know. But not everyone is that way — *you* taught me that. That there are always people you can put faith in... people like Sakura and Ikeda, who have come to terms with me for who I am and who have become proper friends. It’s just not worth it to fight everyone who doesn’t agree. All right?”

“I know.” Tenchi gazed at the ground. “I’m sorry. It feels surreal, you saying this to me, but you’re right.”

“Of course I am.” Ryoko smiled, and in that moment, Tenchi knew he was forgiven. “But no more heroics. Truly, I can defend myself. And they’re really not worth it.”

“Did you find your purse?” Tenchi asked hesitantly. Ryoko nodded.

“Sakura has it.” She agreed. “So we’d better go back and find her. When I heard the commotion, somehow I knew you were in the midst of it, so I just left it with her and hurried over to see what was going on. I know I said I wouldn’t use my magic, but it seemed to be the only way to break up the fight.”

“No, I think this time you were excused.” Tenchi eyed his knuckles ruefully. “All right. We’ll go back. And this time, maybe you should keep an eye on me... make sure I don’t do anything I shouldn’t.”

“It will be a pleasure, Tenchi-kun.” Ryoko’s eyes flickered with amusement. “Okay. Let’s go.”

# Chapter 4

---

## Chapter Four

The bridge of the spaceship was silent, lit only by a single dim light at the furthest end that flickered and danced at intervals, spreading intermittent light across the craft's upper level as the young woman slipped carefully through the wreckage to the main control centre. Her weapon in her hand, she pushed carefully on the door, turning to signal to her companion that it was safe to follow.

A clatter and a muffled 'ouch!' told the woman that her partner was on her tail and she rolled her eyes, hesitating and then slipping back the door, jumping into the drive room as she cocked her stun gun, every inch of her prepared for action.

"Stop!"

The voice of her commander jerked her back to herself and she hesitated, lowering her weapon as the ship's deck was suddenly bathed in bright light and the simulation faded around her. Frowning, she slid her weapon back into its holster, turning to send her superior a questioning look.

"Sir?"

"Mihoshi, you're still not quite getting the hang of this business of stealth, are you?" The commander's eyes were trained on her companion, and the fair woman smiled sheepishly, shrugging her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, but I got my finger stuck in my belt clip." She said contritely. "I dropped my gun, but it was an accident."

"Well, she only dropped one thing this time, and she didn't trip over the door step." The young woman leant up against the wall, faint amusement in her blue eyes. "So that's got to be seen as progress."

The Commander shook his head slowly.

"Kiyone, I want to spend some more time on this with Detective Mihoshi." He said wearily, and deep down Kiyone knew that he was not relishing repeating the training exercise with one so clumsy as her partner. "You might as well head back to Yagami and check the scanners for any incoming data. There's nothing wrong with your stealth movements — in fact, I think you've improved by leaps and

bounds in many disciplines in the course of the last year. There's no need for you to repeat the exercise and it would just be a waste of your time."

"Yes, sir." Kiyone saluted her superior, then cast Mihoshi a sympathetic smile.

"You're almost there." She said amiably. "I'll see you back at Yagami, all right? And we'll go grab some lunch."

"All right." Mihoshi looked resigned. "Don't go to eat without me, Kiyone — I'll work really hard but don't leave me behind — I'll starve!"

"I promise. I won't leave Yagami without you." Kiyone nodded solemnly. Then she saluted her commander again, slipping out of the training suite and back along the hallways towards the docking bay where her spaceship was moored alongside its many sister ships. As she stepped out onto the landing gantry, she stopped, staring up at the gleaming red hull with a sense of satisfaction. She and her ship had been through many trials together, but despite it, both of them had survived.

"But if I really have improved so much in so many areas, that's not entirely down to my own hard work." She acknowledged, boarding her ship and heading up the steps to the main drive room. "I don't know what the Chief would say if he knew that once or twice a week for the past twelve months I'd been slipping out of Headquarters for training on board the Unko. It's a good thing that Mihoshi sleeps so soundly next door, else I'd never stand a chance. She tends to have a sixth sense about me when she's awake, but while she's sleeping, she's dead to the world."

She stifled a yawn, looking rueful.

"Although late night training sessions take it out of you." She acknowledged. "It might be doing my career a lot of good, but sometimes I really need to get a full night's sleep!"

She ran her fingers over the scanners idly, dropping down into her chair as she checked over the various incoming messages. Most of them were just general alerts, and she dismissed them, knowing that duty patrols would already be on their way to investigate and that the Yagami was not on shift to leave Headquarters itself for another twenty four hours.

One final message remained, and she frowned, recognising the incoming transmission frequency as that of the Unko itself. She pursed

her lips, then reached over to hit the dial, waiting impatiently for the big screen to flare up before her, and the grainy image of the Unko's pilot, Seiryō Tennan to materialise on the monitor before her.

"Seiryō?" She asked hesitantly. "What gives? It's the middle of the day — why are you buzzing my ship?"

"Kiyone." The man's features flickered into the screen, and in an instant Kiyone knew something was wrong. Although he offered her a greeting smile, there was a dazed dullness to his normally sharp teal eyes, and she bit her lip, her mind racing as she contemplated the possibilities.

"How are you? It's fortunate that I caught you so easily — you are alone this afternoon?"

"What on earth's the matter with you?" Kiyone demanded. "Mihoshi's still at training, so yes, I'm alone. And don't waste time with all that how are you rubbish — something's upset you and you might as well tell me what it is! I'm guessing that whatever it is is going to interfere with our scheduled training session tomorrow — that's why you're calling me, right?"

There was a long pause, and then Seiryō let out a heavy sigh, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm afraid that I'll have to cancel that." He admitted. "If it's not inconvenient for you, I may have to... to cancel more than one. I'm not sure that it will be easy for me to..well... it's just difficult at the present time."

Kiyone's eyes narrowed as she ran her gaze over him carefully. Then she shook her head.

"Tell me." She said frankly. "No secrets, Seiryō — you should know by now that you can trust me. Tell me what's going on."

Seiryō hesitated again, then he spread his hands.

"I suppose I didn't just call you to tell you that." He admitted. "I called you because... because I wanted to speak to someone who's not wrapped up in everything. Someone away from it... some kind of distraction."

He bit his lip, then,

"Kiyone, my mother passed away late last night." He added quietly. Kiyone's eyes became big with alarm.

"Your mother? Oh no... Seiryō, I'm sorry!"

Seiryō sighed again.

“Well, it was to be expected. She lived longer than any of us really thought she might, so for that I should be grateful.” He confessed. “But in truth, I don’t. I feel angry, more than anything. I’m not sure I totally believe it — even though I hear myself saying it to you, it’s still not quite real.”

“How is Suki taking it?” Kiyone asked softly. Seiryō pursed his lips.

“Better than I am, I think.” He admitted. “She spent most of the night crying, but this morning she seems more... more focused on what we need to do.”

He frowned.

“I don’t know why I’m bothering you with this, to be truthful.” He added. “Since it’s not really your problem at all. But I suppose I needed to speak to a friend... someone I thought might understand. I’ve tried to get in touch with Washu on the Earth as well, but the Unko seems to be too far out of range — or she just is too busy to make any kind of contact with me. I’ve been trying to buzz you on and off for a while — I’m sorry to bother you when I know you’re working.”

“No, forget about it.” Kiyone dismissed it with a flick of her fingers. “It’s all right — it’s fine. Really. But are you sure you’re okay, Seiryō? You look shell-shocked — completely dazed, if I’m honest. You said Suki has cried — what about you?”

“Crying isn’t something I do.”

“Oh, you men and your fragile egos.” Kiyone sighed. “You can’t keep it bottled up, and we both know it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I’m doing that exactly.” A humourless smile touched Seiryō’s face. “The old tool hut in the grounds of the Tennan Estate is rather the worse for wear. I was so angry, I didn’t really think about what I was doing — the thing is entirely in splinters, now.”

“I see.” Kiyone drummed her fingers on the dashboard, casting a fleeting glance behind her as she remembered Mihoshi would soon be on her way up. “Listen, Seiryō, do you want me to come out there? I mean, to the Unko -or to Jurai? I promised Mihoshi to wait for her and that we’d do lunch, but I know she’d understand if I explained it to her. She might be the most airheaded member of the force, but she has a big heart and she wouldn’t mind, if she realised a friend was in trouble.”

“I’m not sure that I could stand Mihoshi-san’s particular brand of bigheartedness right at the moment.” Seiryō shook his head. “And it would be wrong of me to tear you away from your duties, Kiyone. Though I appreciate the thought — just talking to someone outside this house has helped.”

“Well, talk to Suki.” Kiyone told him quietly. “If she’s keeping it together, you might want to take some tips from her. And what about Tokimi? How is she dealing with the whole thing?”

“Tokimi is...” Seiryō faltered, then he shrugged. “She seems to have accepted it as some kind of, well, natural turn of fate. She’s been twisting together flowers all morning, which she says are for... for Mother. I guess that it’s some kind of Kii thing... I don’t know. But she seems best prepared of all of us. Like she knew that it was coming more than Suki or I did.”

“Maybe she did. She is Kii — perhaps she saw it in Lady Kaede somehow.”

“I don’t know. Tokimi is still an enigma in so many ways — I don’t pretend I always understand.” Seiryō sighed.

Kiyone frowned, sitting back in her chair as she pondered things in her mind.

“Mihoshi’s on her way up. I can hear her steps on the gantry from here.” She said at length. “So I have to cut this short. She has no idea that I’ve been meeting up with you so often, and I’d rather she didn’t know about our secret training sessions. Even though she doesn’t hate you any more, she’s indiscreet, and the Chief was mad enough about me teaming up with you to rescue Washu from Rikishouki. He definitely would *not* understand why I’m breaching regulations and taking secret training from a former Galaxy Police Elite who once tried to kill me. I don’t need him questioning my sanity a second time. But...”

“But..?”

“I will find a way to slip away from here later on this evening. And I’ll come to Jurai. Alone.” Kiyone made up her mind. ‘No,’ as Seiryō opened his mouth to protest. “I’m decided. You called me because you wanted my help somehow, even if you didn’t ask for it directly. And you’ve more than given me help over the past few months. I owe you that much. So expect to see me this evening.”

“Kiyone, I...”

“Shh.” Kiyone shook her head. “I have to go. But I will see you

later. I promise.”

Seiryō sighed, then nodded his head and Kiyone saw a faint flicker of relief pass through his troubled teal eyes.

“All right.” He agreed, and the detective knew she had called the situation right. “Thank you, Kiyone. Goodbye.”

“Bye.” Kiyone hesitated, then flicked off the communication switch as the door of the drive room slid back to reveal her tousle-headed companion.

“Well?” She asked quietly. “How did you do the final time around?”

“Better, I think. I didn’t drop my gun.” Mihoshi seemed pleased, but at the sight of her friend’s expression she frowned. “Kiyone, what’s wrong? Did we get a bad message?”

“Sort of.” Kiyone nodded. “Mihoshi, I had a communication from a friend. He... he needs me to travel to see him today, if at all possible. So after lunch, I need you to cover for me with the Chief. Tell him that I’ve had an urgent call out or something. Okay? Can you do that for me?”

“A friend?” Mihoshi looked alarmed. “Not Tenchi and the others?”

“No.” Kiyone shook her head. “Not them, Mihoshi. Another friend.”

“Has something bad happened?”

“Yes.” Kiyone agreed. “He... well, someone close to him has died, and I think he needs some company. I’ll probably be back tonight, but in case I’m not, you’re not to worry about me. I won’t be away long, and I can’t abandon him when he needs me.”

“All right.” Mihoshi agreed soberly. “I’m sorry for your friend, Kiyone. It really sucks... of course you must go to see him. And I’ll tell the Commander what you said.”

“Good.” Kiyone looked grateful. “Then let’s go find some lunch, okay? Then I have to think about fuelling Yagami and shipping out into space, so I need to make a good meal before I do. I’m not quite sure what I’m going into, in truth — Yagami isn’t the only thing that needs fuelling.”

“Then let’s hit the sushi bar.” Mihoshi suggested, grabbing her friend by the arm and Kiyone allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. “Because the sooner you eat, the sooner you can go see your friend and make everything all right!”

---



“Something’s eating you this morning.”

Kane glanced up from where he had been curled up beneath the branches of the big tree, frowning as he lowered the screen on his laptop. It was two days since the graduation party, where he and Tenchi had so nearly come to blows, and as he made eye contact with his companion, he found the memories of that evening flooding back. He sighed, setting his computer aside as the young man dropped down onto the grass, sending him a friendly, sympathetic grin.

“What’s the matter?” He asked playfully. “Graduation is over and you’re already writing up your resume?”

“Something like it.” Kane grimaced, nodding his head. “Although now you’ve broken my train of thought, Kenichi-kun, I doubt I’m going to get it finished today. You always have the worst possible timing, I swear you do — not all of us can afford to live in this city off our father’s earnings indefinitely, you know.”

“Your family are in the wrong business.” His companion’s smile widened and he stretched out on the grass, reaching idly for the computer and lifting the screen before his companion could stop him. “Let me see that, huh? Maybe I can give you a few tips — after all, I know a lot of things about business and getting in at the right level. Maybe I can help you out — you know, it’s sometimes who you know rather than what you know.”

“I’m doing okay, I think.” Kane frowned, grabbing his computer and sliding it back into its protective bag. “Though thank you for the offer. Right now I have a couple of places I’m looking into applying with — so I’ll see how that pans out first, if it’s all the same to you. Not that I want you to get the wrong idea — but I’d rather get a job under my own steam, if I can.”

“Admirable.” His friend laughed. “Though really, Kane-kun, you know that finding a job in this rat-race city isn’t as easy as just pushing forward a resume and hoping for the best. Where did you finish in your class again? Fifteenth? Sixteenth? Something like that?”

“Twelfth.” Despite himself, a flicker of annoyance crossed Kane’s features. “Not that it’s any business of yours. We may have gone to the same high school, Ishida, but we’ve had very different college careers. We both know that you have a place waiting for you in the family business now graduation is done with... class position isn’t important to you.”

“As you say.” Kenichi eyed him speculatively, then, “What about that friend of yours?”

“Huh?”

“Masaki.” Kenichi’s eyes twinkled with humour as Kane’s brows drew together in consternation. “I almost wish I’d bothered going to the graduation shindig. Far as I heard it from Kamikura, you and Masaki almost smashed one another’s lights out — I missed an event, didn’t I?”

“Masaki and I are not exactly friends.” Kane said stiffly. “Not these days. People change, and not always in the way you expect them to. But that’s none of your business, either. Masaki and you have never had much in common — and my friendships aren’t your business, Ishida-san. We both know that’s the case.”

“Sometimes you can be so cold.” Kenichi did not seem at all perturbed. “I guess you’d rather I didn’t remind you of the fact that I warned you about Masaki’s type when we all first enrolled. He’s a country boy. Wound up in mountain shrine ritual and weird superstition. You’re a city kid — and you’ve always had your head screwed on straight.”

He paused, sending his companion a sidelong glance.

“I bet Masaki didn’t finish somewhere round fifteenth.”

“I finished *twelfth*.” Kane bristled. “And Masaki finished third, if it’s any business of yours at all.”

“Only third?” Kenichi’s eyebrows disappeared into his fringe at this. “Gee, he must have been distracted. I wonder what by.”

“Can it, Kenichi. I’m not in the mood.”

“No, I’m sure.” Kenichi pursed his lips, and for a moment there was silence between them. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

“Still, now we’re open season on visitors from other worlds, the job competition is going to be something manic.” He said speculatively. “My father’s already talking about the possibilities of outsourcing, and looking further afield to see if he can get a cheaper deal on the kind of electronic equipment he’s looking for. It’s the way it’s going to be, I suppose, from hereon in. Now that the government seems to have accepted that these Juraians mean us no harm, it’s bound to cause massive immigration. I heard a report on the radio this morning that in the United States they’re already looking at setting up specific alien zones, and all of that. Areas where they can come and settle and be a part of society. It’s a matter of time before the same thing happens here. After all, considering that Masaki’s chick has been living here all along — don’t the Japanese government think she’s some kind of

emissary or something? They're bound to take the same line as America, in the long run."

Kane clenched his fists, his eyes darkening at this.

"Japan is not going to become a base for every alien under the sun." He said quietly. "Whatever happens in other places, that's just not going to happen here."

"That's naive, if you ask me." Kenichi spread his hands, casting his friend a playful grin. "Hey, and who says it's a bad thing, right? Competition is good for business, so my father says. And I'm sure you stand as good a chance as anyone. I mean, some of this alien technology is out of this world — literally. But you've the homegrown charm, and I'm sure that it won't get in your way, now you're looking at finding a job."

"Ishida, are you just here to annoy me or what?" Kane demanded impatiently, and Kenichi laughed, shaking his head.

"No, of course not." He said lightly. "I only came to speak to an old friend about prospective job opportunities. That's all."

"And what do you gain from it, if you helped me out?" Kane frowned. "I don't understand. If your father's company is all gung ho about this alien business, can you really see me being a part of that? No offence, Kenichi, but I'm not sold on the idea and I'm sure that most ordinary Earth-born folk aren't. Masaki might be a freak, shackled up with that girl of his — but he's an exception. People won't stand for it. Not in the long run."

Kenichi's smile widened, and slowly he shook his head. He slipped his hand into his pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper and handing it to his companion.

"Father's interest in the aliens is more than just business." He said softly. "He hopes to exploit what he can find out about them. His belief is that, if we know what we're dealing with, and they become a threat, well, we can deal with that threat. They're being real obliging, giving us all this technology — but do we really know what any of it is for? That's why Father's so keen to get a finger in the pie. Know your enemy — isn't that how the saying goes?"

"You mean... when you say your father is outsourcing..." Kane's eyes widened, and he took the paper hesitantly from his friend's fingers. Kenichi laughed, nodding.

"He's conducting some secret research into them, under the guise of doing legit business." He agreed. "Earth people aren't stupid, Kane,

and we're not going to be duped into believing all of this can possibly be good for our future or our freedom. But it's a risky business, getting involved in something like that when you consider that the government are all set to be friendly and accomodating to these Juraian creatures. That's why I sought you out. I know you have grievances, and you and I, we go way back. I'm not trying to screw you over or wind you up. But I do know you're smart, Kyoda-kun. And I do know that you're not easily swayed by popular opinion. If you believe in something, you hang onto it. That's why we've always been such good friends. Even if I am a spoiled little rich boy in your eyes."

"But I..."

"Am I wrong?" Kenichi asked softly, and Kane frowned, shaking his head.

"In that light, what you say makes sense." He said quietly. "But I'm not sure whether or not I want to be involved in whatever your father is cooking up. He's rich, Kenichi, and you have his protection. I don't have that, and I've seen with my own eyes how dangerous these creatures can be. I know what they can do — and it's not pretty."

"Read that." Kenichi indicated the folded sheet. "I think you'll find it interesting, when you know exactly how dangerous. Not pretty is an understatement, I think you'll agree... if you read that, you'll realise that the Earth might already be under assault. This is serious stuff, Kyoda... and I need to know I can rely on you."

Kane bit his lip, slowly unfolding the sheet of paper and smoothing it out on the grass. His eyes widened in alarm as he registered what it was, and he gazed at his friend in horror.

"But this is...?"

"Ryoko Hakubi's charge sheet." Kenichi nodded his head grimly. "Fresh from the archives of these Galaxy Police people Father has been talking to. A friend of his travelled to Jurai on the first goodwill mission, and he discovered that there were a few Earth-born officers working in this organisation... so he's been able to find out a couple of things about space and the peoples that inhabit it from them."

He tapped the photograph in the top right corner.

"She's Masaki's woman, isn't she? I am right — that is the same girl?"

"It's the same girl." Kane swallowed hard, running his finger down the extensive list of crimes. "Heist at the Galactic Bank of Jurai, raids on planets, random vandalism, theft, destruction, general antisocial

behaviour... Masaki can't know about all of this. If he did... if he did..."

"Ryoko Hakubi is what's known as a space pirate, or so I've been informed." Kenichi shuffled into a more comfortable position, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know quite what that means, but it's a pretty impressive resume."

"When that man came... the night the club was destroyed... he was with the Galaxy Police." Kane whitened as fresh memories flooded his senses. "He called Ryoko some kind of criminal then... I remember it now. He said... something about... about the scum of the universe. Is that why he came here, in the end? My memories of what happened are a little fuzzy — but did all that happen because he came to the Earth to arrest a dangerous space criminal?"

"No doubts in my mind." Kenichi nodded his head. Given that kind of record, no wonder he was full on. And there's more, too."

"More?" Kane glanced up in horror. "More than this, you mean? Isn't this bad enough?"

"Yes." Kenichi agreed. "But this... here. Look at this one."

He handed over a second sheet, and Kane unfolded it with trembling fingers, reading the words with an unsteady gaze.

"Haki." He murmured the unfamiliar name, then, "Oh God. Are you for real?"

"Unfortunately, I am." Kenichi said grimly. "According to my father's sources, this Haki guy has murdered and slain his way across the universe for generations. Longer than any of us have been alive, even. It's well known with these Galaxy Police people that Haki and Ryoko were associates. Haki taught Ryoko to be the same kind of creature he is. We have a real demon in our midst, Kane. A true viper. And unless we act now, we might just find the Earth becomes the latest victim of a vicious pirate assault."

## Chapter 5

---

### Chapter Five

The gardens were peaceful now.

Seiryō walked slowly between the softly swaying branches of the tall trees that lined the southern end of the estate, pausing to glance absently back towards the house as he did so. A sad look touched his teal eyes and he frowned, leaning up against the trunk of a nearby tree as he fought to keep his emotions in check.

It had been a hard night.

He closed his eyes, picturing the last few moments he had spent with his mother before pain and darkness had snatched her from him, this time forever. Over the past few weeks, he had known that she was growing weaker, and that it had taken more and more of Tokimi's herbal remedies and the physician's medications to keep her suffering under control. And yet, somehow, he had managed to ignore it as much as possible. He had pretended not to see the deepening lines around her tired aqua eyes, or the greyish pallor of her skin as she woke to face each new day.

*“My son, will you spend some time with me?”*

Her voice pierced his thoughts, and he frowned, allowing his mind to drift back to that last evening. The room had been silent, he remembered, and for once, empty of either his sister or the gentle, kind-hearted charge his family had taken care of since the destruction of her own homeworld some time before. He had faltered at first, unsure as to how to approach the fragile, delicate creature that had once been the strong-willed, resolute mother he had always so adored. But something in her voice had compelled him to obedience, and he had nodded, even as though he were still a small child of eight or nine, kneeling beside the bed as he took her hand in his.

“Yes, Okaasama? I am here.” his words had been quiet too, as though raising his voice would somehow shatter the gentle ambience of the bedchamber and cause his mother more pain. At his hesitation, she had smiled, squeezing his hand feebly between her thin, frail fingers.

“You are afraid, my boy. I can see it in your eyes, though you seek to conceal it from me.”

She had always been better at reading his true thoughts than anyone else, he had always known that, but at that moment he had hated it more than anything, to know that she could see into his heart and recognise how deep his emotion ran.

“I worry for you, Mother. That’s all.”

“Yes, I know.” She had paused, then she had offered him a smile. “You know that I am proud of you, Seiryō, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course. You tell me so, and often.”

“More often, maybe, than is necessary, but a mother always does wish to praise her children.” Kaede’s lips had twitched into a rueful smile, giving her face a little more life, and despite himself, Seiryō had been comforted by that brief sign of his mother’s strong will. “But in your case, Seiryō, I have much to be thankful for. You are no longer a boy, I know it now better than I ever have. Since you returned from the Galaxy Police — since your father’s passing — I have seen what a man you have become. How you have grown to fill the role of Lord of this Manor. I know you will continue to earn the Emperor’s trust and faith, and keep the name of Tennan as proudly as did your grandfather, once upon a time. Your father sometimes doubted you’d fill his shoes, musuko-chan. But I did not. And that I was able to live to see myself proven right — this is a great comfort to me.”

“Mother...” Seiryō had faltered at that point, uncertain as to what he should say, and a soft laugh had escaped Kaede’s lips.

“I have spoken to your sister, and now I speak to you.” She said softly. “I will be plain, Seiryō — I don’t think we will get another such chance to talk. You may seek to ignore what is coming, but I cannot. I must be prepared, and I am content. With the blessing of Lady Sasami and her divine power, I know my soul is in safe hands, when I cross over from this life. I’ve kept going as long as I could, because I wanted to be sure you and Suki would be all right without me. And now I see it very clearly. You and she, you are strong people and you have each other to rely on. What you have both become...”

She had faltered at this point, a flicker of pain crossing her features, and fear had lurched in Seiryō’s heart as he had understood the truth behind her remarks.

“Mother, are you going to leave us tonight?” He had asked, almost afraid to speak the words. Kaede had gazed at him for a moment, then she had managed another feeble smile.

“As Tsunami wills it.” She had murmured. “I leave it in her hands,

as I leave the Tennen family name in yours, my son.”

After that her eyes had closed, and she had spoken no more. An hour later, her breathing had stilled for the last time, and amid Suki's grief-stricken sobs, Seiryō had struggled to understand the finality of the night's events.

“But calling Kiyone... was it right?” He wondered aloud, gazing up at the branches of the tree above as he shook himself out of his unpleasant memories. “To drag her from the Galaxy Police, to bring her here at such a time as this...”

He frowned, biting his lip.

“Would Mother have even understood my motives?” He murmured. “Okaasama, I'm not as strong as you think I am. I've become weak... weaker than you know. Something I've spent so much time fighting... and yet, at a time like this, have I let myself buckle because of the grief of losing you? Right now my brain can't deal with more emotions... did I do the right thing, in contacting her this morning?”

“Nii-chan?”

The sound of Tokimi's voice raised him from his reverie, and he turned, offering his ward a slight smile as she hurried across the grass towards him. Her arms were full of flowers, and Seiryō pursed his lips, recognising the distinct colours of the blooms.

“For Mother?” He asked softly. Tokimi nodded, her blue eyes unusually sombre.

“For her blessing. To have a good passage to the next world.” She said seriously. “Lady Kaede can have these, can't she, Nii-chan? It is all right? I know she is not Kii, but Tokimi... Tokimi wants to do something for Lady Kaede. She was... she was kind to Tokimi too. She did not mind me staying here. Can I take the flowers to Lady Kaede, Nii-chan? It's all right, to do that?”

“It's all right, Tokimi.” Seiryō nodded his head, only half focused on what she was saying. “She always loved flowers — and I'm sure she'd be glad of the sentiment behind it, too. She was a very good person, my mother. She would have been touched and happy to know that you felt that way.”

“Then I shall go there, now, and give them to her.” Tokimi said firmly. She turned to go, then paused, turning to send her companion a doubtful glance.

“Nii-chan is hurting a lot.” She murmured. “I'm sorry, Nii-chan.



Tokimi does not know what remedy can help this pain.”

“Tokimi...” Seiryō sighed, shaking his head. “No, I know you don’t. And it’s all right. Really, I think I’m just best off alone, right at the moment. I’m not sure how to really talk about it, just now. So you take the flowers to Mother, and... and leave me to think things through. I’m sure I will be all right, presently. I know you see more than anyone else, but really, I will be fine.”

Tokimi looked troubled, but she nodded her head.

“I will.” She agreed slowly. “But Nii-chan, Tokimi knows this. Hiding grief is bad. Tokimi ran away from it, when Father died. Tokimi made a mistake. Nii-chan mustn’t make this mistake too — Nii-chan mustn’t be alone too long. All right? Tokimi was alone for so long, and... and Tokimi won’t let Nii-chan be.”

“How can I be alone, with you and Suki here too?” Seiryō asked lightly. “I promise, it will all be fine. Take your blooms and make Mother’s spirit happy, if she still lingers on. Truly, I will be quite fine here. Besides, there’s little chance of me being completely alone, anyway. I...”

He paused, then,

“I spoke to a friend today, and she is coming here, this evening.” He said slowly. “So you can rest assured that I don’t intend to hide away.”

“A friend?” Tokimi looked startled, then, as she stared at him, comprehension flickered in her sapphire eyes.

“Kiyo-neesan.” She breathed. Seiryō started, eying her disconcertedly.

“Dammit, Tokimi, stop reading whatever it is in me you’re reading and give me some privacy, please.” He begged.

“It is Kiyo-neesan.” Tokimi’s eyes widened, and Seiryō sighed.

“Yes, it is.” He admitted. “But listen, Tokimi. Whatever crazy ideas you may have, you must not say anything about them to Kiyone when she’s here. All right? She’s coming as a friend because she wanted to come — that’s all. Is that clear?”

“Tokimi promised Nii-chan never to talk about it again.” Tokimi said evenly. “Tokimi must go to Lady Kaede. She needs her flowers now.”

With that the young Kii girl turned on her heel, shawl flapping in the gentle breeze as she hurried across the grounds towards the gate

that led to the Tennan family mausoleum.

Once alone, Seiryō sank down onto the ground, rubbing his temples as he fought for his composure and won.

“Damn Tokimi’s Kii sight.” he muttered. “She’s said nothing since she first called me on this after our return from Rikishouki... I truly thought she’d forgotten, or given it up as a flight of fancy. I underestimated her... or maybe I overestimated my will. I thought I had suppressed any sign of those impulses inside of me, but now my guard is down, I’m finding that they’re still there, lurking beneath the surface. And if Tokimi can see them, then I must be careful when Kiyone is here. No matter what happens, I cannot let her know. I will not disrespect the memory of my mother by acting in such a reckless way so soon after her passing.”

“Well, to all intents and purposes it sounds like you had an eventful send off in Osaka, my boy.”

Noboyuki sank down into a vacant armchair, taking a sip of hot tea as he cast his discomfited son a look of amusement. “I suppose that was only to be expected — considering that you are my son, after all.”

“Father.” Tenchi reddened, shaking his head as he remembered the night of the graduation party. “It wasn’t exactly like that. I mean, I didn’t...”

He faltered, biting his lip, and from her corner by the window, Washu let out an amused snort.

“What I find hard to believe is that it was *Ryoko* who broke up this little skirmish.” She reflected. “Has my daughter really grown up so much as that?”

“Well, she came between us.” Tenchi sighed, spreading his hands. “And I’m glad she did. For a moment I just lost sight of where I was, that’s all. He — Kyoda — he said some things and they made me angry. I’m glad she intervened. It could have been nasty, otherwise.”

“Things about Ryoko, Tenchi?” Noboyuki asked softly, and Tenchi nodded his head slowly, glancing at his hands.

“It’s such a pain.” He murmured. “Father, I thought that in the long run people on the Earth would come to accept things the way we have. I mean, it’s all been strange and sometimes surreal, but I didn’t imagine it would be like this. It’s frustrating and it gets to me. I love Ryoko... I don’t understand why people can’t just be happy for me and just, well, accept that this is the choice I’ve made. Ryoko might have

been born outside this planet, but she's not a demon or a monster. She's a woman, just as Sakura or any of our other female classmates are women. Why aren't they able to see that?"

"People always fear the things they don't understand." Washu settled herself more comfortably on her cushion, her pretty eyes becoming grave as she eyed the young prince thoughtfully. "To begin with, Tenchi, I'm sure that you didn't think you'd ever become accustomed to the idea of aliens in your house. Remember, you've had some years to get used to what the Earth is still adjusting to. You've also seen sides of Ryoko and Ayeka and dare I say even myself that most people here never will. You have to give it — and them — time to work it out for themselves. After all, it's not all negative. Sakura and Hiroshi have accepted what goes on here as par for the course, haven't they?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then why bother so much about Kyoda-san and his hang-ups?" Washu shrugged her shoulders. "There will always be people who want to judge, Tenchi. I know you've had an easy ride of it in that respect, for the most of your life. Even before you knew about the alien situation, you never really encountered people who acted this way towards you — am I right?"

"I suppose you are." Tenchi sighed. "The truth is, I've always tried to keep peaceful and friendly relations with everyone I've met. I never really had enemies when I was in High School, and until the whole thing happened at the club in Osaka, I didn't have any trouble at university, either. True, I've fought villains in space, but somehow that life and this one were separate up to that point. Now... now they aren't, and people can't deal with it. It's frustrating, that's all. And I'm sure it hurts Ryoko more than she's saying... she won't admit it, but it must."

"Ryoko has dealt with rejection all her life." Washu said pensively. "You mustn't underestimate her ability to deal with that — she's probably more prepared for it than you are, in a lot of ways. She came into this world in the first place expecting to be treated as she has been in other sectors. The reason she loves you as much as she does is because you didn't treat her that way, and you never have. I think you'll find she's dealing with it all a lot better than you are. After all, she's encountered enough doubters already in her lifetime — her path hasn't always been as smooth as yours."

"The bottom line is, son, that nobody here has any objection to the choices you've made." Noboyuki added comfortably, setting his mug

down on the table in front of him. "When you come to it, I married an alien myself, when I met and wed Achika. I didn't know it, of course — or that Otousama wasn't born on this world. But he and I have always had a good understanding, and even knowing what I know now, it hasn't changed the way things are in this family. Achika would probably have embraced the idea wholeheartedly, and wanted to know all about it. And I'm sure that, if she had seen you with Ryoko, she would not have had any objections to that, either. You have to be thicker skinned, that's all. Your happiness does not depend on the views of random individuals, after all."

"Dad?" Tenchi's eyes opened wide with surprise at the uncharacteristic seriousness of his father's speech. "I never heard you talk quite like that before."

"Noboyuki is right, though." Washu said thoughtfully. "Tenchi, you can't ever please everyone... so you really need to stop trying. Sometimes the biggest test in a relationship is knowing and accepting the limits and sacrifices that relationship brings. You and Ryoko have come through a lot of things together. In light of that, it really serves no purpose to pursue conflict with your former classmates. Graduation is over, after all. How likely are you to encounter Kyoda-san again, now that spring is here?"

"I suppose I see your point." Tenchi sighed, getting to his feet and stretching his limbs as he contemplated. "You know, you both make a lot of sense. It's just hard to always see it in that light, that's all. To apply it to a real life situation, even though I know you're right."

"Noboyuki and I both know what it is to love, and what it is to lose that person." Washu said softly. "But even despite that, we both know that neither one of us would have made any different decisions. Even had I known Mikamo would die the way he did, I am still glad to have been able to know him. And for Noboyuki, I'm sure the same is true of Achika. Putting it into perspective, Tenchi, you have Ryoko and you have the time now to be with her. Whatever the future brings you both, now is the time you should be holding on to. You never know when those memories might become more important."

"Washu..." Tenchi pursed his lips, then he nodded his head. "Yes, I understand what you mean. Kyoda and Kamikura are none of my concern any more, and I shouldn't let it taint my relationship with my fiancée. Ryoko and I will be married soon, and that's what really counts. In the end, that's the thing that means more to me... and I won't take it for granted that it will always be there."

"Where is your dazzling fiancée this morning, anyhow?" Noboyuki

asked curiously. "I've not seen her since breakfast — is she still here in the mountains, or has she gone out somewhere?"

"She's in Osaka." Tenchi said with a grin. "Sakura's found an apartment at last and she wanted a second opinion — with Ryoko's phasing and flying, it means she can get into the places the owners would want to keep locked away, and Sakura's canny. She wants to be sure of what she's getting before she gets it, if you know what I mean. Besides, Sakura's going to help Ryoko out with Earth wedding advice, too — so it seems a fair exchange."

"Ryoko is fond of your Earth friends, isn't she?" Washu reflected, and Tenchi nodded.

"I think Ikeda and Sakura are as much Ryoko's friends now as they are mine, especially after our adventures together on Yousai." He said ruefully. "They understand better than anyone what life is like in the Masaki household — I think that's helped."

"Then really you have nothing to worry about, regarding Ryoko and her being accepted as your wife." Washu scolded. "Since your own closest friends have adopted her — you really do worry far too much, Tenchi. Especially for one so young."

"I'll try to keep that in mind." Despite himself, Tenchi laughed. "And on that note, I'm going to walk up to the shrine and see if Grandpa needs any help this morning — since I'm back here full time now, I might as well make myself useful. After all, I'm hoping that he's going to be the one to marry us — and I want to keep on his good side!"

"Well, that was a productive morning."

Sakura glanced at the silver key in her hand, then turned to offer her companion a warm grin, her dark eyes lighting up with amusement as she surveyed her friend's casual demeanour. "And I appreciate your coming to help out, Ryoko. Some places think they can take first time renters for a ride if they're fresh out of college, and even though I've got this work contract pretty much sealed up, I don't want to be overpaying on my rent. I like to know I'm getting what I'm paying for, so thank you for your help."

"Hey, it's no bother by me." Ryoko's golden eyes danced with mischief as she shrugged her shoulders, dismissing the matter with a careless flick of her fingers. "And it seems fair. You are going to help me organise my wedding, after all, aren't you? If that's the case, I need somewhere in Osaka I can come where we can discuss those

things. Just don't ask me to help settle the place in or anything, okay? I don't do domestic — it's not my style."

Sakura laughed, shaking her head.

"I'm fine with the whole domestic thing, and it's all right. My father and sister are going to be on hand, and my brother in law has agreed to help out, also." She said with a grin. "All in all, I should be fine. Etsuko and her husband are in town visiting home at just the right time, so we should be okay."

"It seems weird now you and Tenchi and everyone aren't at school any more." Ryoko reflected, as the two girls sauntered down the main street towards the city park and the coffee house frequented by many of the local inhabitants. "Tenchi believes that now he's out of education, the United Nations people will want to talk to him about Jurai as well. And about other space things, too. It's all highly boring, but there's some talk about Earth wanting to be properly recognised by the Galaxy Police as a populated planet, not as it is now — under some protected primitive life form act thing. I don't know the details, but I imagine that it's going to mean Tenchi and I actually have to do something instead of just flit around the universe aimlessly and let them pay us for the privilege."

"The Galaxy Police." Sakura frowned. "That's who that Seiryō Tennan was working with when he first came to Osaka, isn't it? When he was still under that weird spell and all of that. Am I right?"

"Yes, but you can rest assured that he wasn't doing his job at the time." Ryoko bit her lip, considering. "In truth, Sakura, I'd rather they didn't set up a space port anywhere in this sector, or start patrolling the area in the way that they do other regions of space. There's always meant to have been resident officers around the Earth zone, but the truth is it's such a remote area that the roles haven't always been filled and that suits me. I don't really like the Galaxy Police. Far too intrusive — far too nosy for their own good."

"I suppose that for a space pirate, a police officer is the natural enemy." Sakura looked amused. "In that respect, space works just the same as the world down here, doesn't it? People who commit crime and people who try and stop it — so long as these space police don't want to do the things Seiryō Tennan did, I think it can't be a bad thing to have some further defence against people like that Haki creature who came after you. You're a reformed pirate now, in any case. Rehabilitated — they can't touch you."

"I know, but old habits die hard." Ryoko admitted. "The only

Galaxy Police officials I have any time for are Kiyone and Mihoshi — they're the exceptions. But they're both far too valuable to Headquarters to be sent out to the sticks like this now, even if Earth are trying to up their intergalactic standing. And I don't want the headache of being followed everywhere by rookie cops waiting for me to reoffend."

"I haven't met this Kiyone or Mihoshi, but I imagine you'll invite them to your wedding, so I suppose I will." Sakura clasped her hands together. "I'm excited by this, you know. I've been to weddings, of course, but never one involving an alien. Everything that you and Tenchi do seems to be unique, so I'm not quite sure what this wedding will be like."

"Well, that's why I have you to advise me, right?" Ryoko looked impish. "I want a proper Earth wedding, you know."

"A proper Earth wedding?" Sakura looked startled. "You mean a normal, traditional Japanese wedding?"

"Yes." Ryoko nodded her head. "After all, I'm going to become a proper member of this planet's population when I become Mrs Tenchi Masaki, aren't I? The United Nations have accepted me being here, and the Japanese government have even given me paperwork — but I will properly belong once I've made that commitment. And that's what I want. Besides, I think it's what Tenchi wants, also. Neither of us wanted to go to Jurai and let the Emperor make a stupid fuss over his great grandson's wedding. We're going to be married here, and you're going to teach me how. It'll be a lot less hassle that way."

"Well, if you're sure." Sakura looked doubtful. "I can try."

"What's that look for?" Ryoko put her hands on her hips indignantly. "Are you suggesting I can't do anything in a normal Earth type way?"

"No, of course not." Sakura shook her head, a smile touching her lips at this. "But... well, okay. If that's what you want, I'll do my best. In which case, when I go back to my parents' this evening, I'll dig out the photos of Etsuko's wedding to show you. Are you going to be in Osaka again any time soon, Ryoko? The sooner we begin looking at this, the better... if you don't know anything about Japanese weddings yet, there's a lot for you to learn."

"Well, then we could go now." Ryoko shrugged. "I have no plans, and Tenchi's still in the mountains anyway."

She pinkened.

“He thinks I know more about this than I do.” She owned. “I told him I’d found some stuff out already, but to be honest, I haven’t got so very far. The last day of his exams, I went to the library and had a look on the internet, but I really don’t like these Earth machines. They’re not as durable as Washu’s computers — and it didn’t really take to me.”

“You burned out a library computer?” Sakura blinked, then she laughed. “And you want me to take you home with me? My parents don’t know that one of my friends is an alien, Ryoko — I’d rather not introduce them to the concept with a small household explosion.”

“Hey, I can be good. I promise.” Ryoko held up her hands. “It wasn’t my fault, I swear. Just the screen was flickering, and I thought, maybe if I gave it a little bit more power... after all, my magic is a lot like the electricity they use in some solar sectors. Not here, though, evidently. Maybe that’s why so many things explode around me. Earth stuff is just not tough enough. Either way, the thing went bang and I thought I should make myself scarce in the ensuing chaos. I never did get to go back and pick up my prints.”

“And I guess you can’t tell Tenchi that you almost burnt down the library.” Sakura’s amusement was clear now. “All right, I get it. We’ll keep away from Earth computers and we’ll use a nice safe medium instead — a photo album. First, though, let’s grab a coffee somewhere, all right? It might only be spring but I’m hot after this morning, and I think it would be better if we got the train back to my family’s home. Teleportation is all very well, but again, my parents don’t know about you yet.”

“I couldn’t teleport there anyway. I’ve never been to your parental home, so I wouldn’t know where I was aiming.” Ryoko shrugged carelessly. “And I’m up for a drink, although it’s a bit early in the day for sake, even for me. I guess coffee will do.”

“You know, I’m glad that graduation hasn’t meant you and Tenchi are completely disappearing from this area.” As they sat in a corner booth, Sakura took a pensive sip of her coffee, setting it down on the table before her. “I know I said it before, but I really would have hated being here completely on my own. But if Osaka is close enough for you to teleport to, I’m sure that means I’ll get to see something of the both of you even now classes are finished.”

“What about Hiroshi?” Ryoko asked curiously, tilting her head on one side as she eyed her friend. “I thought he was coming to Osaka too full time — isn’t that what you said before?”



“Yes.” Sakura pursed her lips. “At least, I think so. But I haven’t spoken to him since the night of the graduation party. I figured he probably had other things on his mind, and I certainly have. So I don’t know what he’s decided to do. Maybe Tenchi knows more than I do — you know what guys are like. They don’t talk to girls.”

Ryoko looked thoughtful, dipping her finger absently in her drink and stirring it, oblivious to the strange looks she was getting from across the coffee shop floor.

“Funny.” She said off-handedly. “I always thought you had brown eyes, Sakura.”

“Huh?” Sakura stared, taken off guard by this. “What do you mean, Ryoko?”

“Nothing.” Ryoko shrugged. “Just for a minute there, I wondered if perhaps they were green.”

At this, Sakura’s eyes widened, a pink flush spreading across her cheeks.

“Green?” She repeated. “Ryoko, are you suggesting I’m jealous of someone? Or... of something?”

“I’m suggesting that you didn’t like Hiroshi turning up with Miss five foot nine and no extra padding at the graduation shindig.” Ryoko said calmly, licking the coffee from the end of her finger and offering her companion a benign smile. “That’s all.”

Now there was no concealing Sakura’s blushes, and she folded her arms, glaring at the pirate indignantly.

“Ryoko!” She exclaimed. “Are you seriously suggesting that I’m interested in Hiroshi Ikeda? In *that* way?”

“Aren’t you?” Ryoko raised an eyebrow. “Because if you’re not, you’re doing a good job of hiding it.”

Sakura opened her mouth to protest, then, as Ryoko’s words sank in she groaned, burying her head in her hands.

“Do you think he knows?” She asked hesitantly. “I mean, do you think bringing that girl to the shindig was some kind of... well, message?”

“Kura-chan, Ikeda is a dope.” Ryoko said succinctly. “All men are dopes. Look at Tenchi. I practically had to kill myself fighting Haki before he realised he wanted me around. Ikeda probably hasn’t the slightest idea. Even if you wrote it down and stapled it to his head, he

might miss the point. You needn't worry about that."

Sakura ran her fingers through her thick dark hair.

"It sucks, huh." She murmured, looking rueful. "I didn't realise that I was obvious enough for you to have picked it up, Ryoko. I didn't realise myself for a long time — you know, that he was more than just the dorky guy I hung out with. If you really want to know the truth, when we all began at college, it was Tenchi I sort of, well, liked. But... Tenchi and I are like brother and sister. As soon as I got to know him, I realised that he was going to be my best friend, but nothing else and that suited me. When you came into the picture, all of that was a mile behind me."

"And you think Ikeda is better looking than Tenchi?" Ryoko's eyebrows shot up at this. "Maybe there is something wrong with your eyes, after all."

"It's not just about that." Sakura shook her head. "Ikeda isn't... he's not ugly, Ryoko. I like how he looks with his glasses and his floppy long hair — he has his own charm, and well, I guess it hasn't only been an attraction based on looks, anyway. He might be a dope, and he might say stupid things about alien girls or, well, any girls. But the truth is, he makes me laugh. And... well, he has a good heart, that's all. Tenchi's always been in love with you, and it's never bothered me — that's how I knew it really wasn't Tenchi I wanted, after all. Kind as he is, it was never that way — you know? But seeing Hiroshi at that place with that girl... that shook me up a little."

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Besides, I'm not as pretty as you are." She said resignedly. "Or as pretty as his date. I'm the kind of girl who's everyone's friend, and that's all."

Ryoko snorted.

"What kind of attitude is that?" She demanded. "Is that what Earth girls do when a guy they like turns up with some other chick on his arm? Yeesh. We're talking about Hiroshi Ikeda, not some superstar hero that everyone's beating down the door for. Are you really that much of a defeatist that you're giving up before you've even begun?"

"What's the point?" Sakura shrugged her shoulders again. "He's not interested in me that way. Physical attraction might not mean anything to me, Ryoko, but Hiroshi's different."

Ryoko did not answer, and fear leapt into Sakura's heart as she registered her friend's expression.

“Ryoko, you are not going to say anything to him about me, do you hear?” She said firmly. “Swear to me now on your relationship with Tenchi that you are not going to interfere in something that’s none of your business!”

“I’m not going to talk to Ikeda about anything. That’s not my job — you’re not thirteen years old.” Was Ryoko’s crushing reply. “But if you want something, Sakura, you can’t get it by sitting and whining about it. How do you think I got Tenchi? You have to be direct. Make your case. Make him realise what he’s missing. If you don’t do that, how the hell can you complain? Men are stupid. They need pointers — they don’t know how they feel until a girl puts them straight anyway.”

“I have no idea how you got Tenchi.” Sakura eyed her friend warily. “Knowing you how I do, there could be any number of ways. Besides, you always give the impression of it being destined to be — are you saying it wasn’t love at first sight, then?”

“I tried to barbeque him, and he wanted me to go back to where I came from.” Ryoko sighed nostalgically. “It was quite a night, really, with one thing or another.”

“You tried to *what*?”

“Well, it was a joke, really. I’ve never been into the killing thing, but it’s always fun to make men run crying to their mothers.” Ryoko said pensively. “Tenchi wasn’t like them, though. He stood up to me, and I guess I respected that. He had nothing but a garden hoe, but even so, he faced me down. Men like that don’t come around very often — so I decided at that point to stick around and drum it into him that he could do a lot worse than take me on. Of course, it took him a while — but he got there in the end. Perseverance, that’s the secret. If you know what you want, you have to make sure he knows it, too. If he doesn’t know, he can’t act on it. Can he?”

“I suppose not.” Sakura rested her chin in her hands. “I guess I should have known you’d have a unique beginning to your acquaintance, given the way you both are. Say it with garden tools, huh? Well, it’s original if nothing else.”

“We try.” Ryoko grinned. “But you’re missing the point. Kura, if you go for the jugular, sure, he might humiliate you horribly and he might break your heart. Men suck that way. But if you don’t go for it, you’re gonna miss out anyway. You’ll be just friends forever. And humiliation is a lot easier to get over than you might think. If at first you don’t succeed, and all that — believe me, if it’s important to you, it’s worth fighting for. The question is, is it?”

“You’re making me ashamed of myself.” Sakura grimaced. “But honestly, I don’t ever know how to bring the subject up. And now he has this other girl... maybe I missed my boat already, huh?”

She shrugged.

“Let’s not focus on this any more.” She added. “We’re going to discuss your wedding plans this afternoon, not my lack of a love life.”

“As you like.” Ryoko grinned, the wicked twinkle back in her golden eyes. “Just take it from me — the people who sit back and wait wait a damn long time. You’ve met Ayeka, haven’t you? She’s the Princess of waiting, and I don’t mean that as a pun. It pays to be direct. That’s all.”

“I remember Ayeka.” Sakura looked thoughtful. “Washu-san did say that she’d once loved Tenchi too. Is that what you mean?”

Ryoko nodded.

“Tenchi’s always said he was never in love with Ayeka, but I guess I’ll never know one hundred percent for sure.” She said flippantly. “But if he was, she never pushed hard enough to get him. Either way, he isn’t now, and that’s what matters to me. I took my chance, I suppose... and I kept taking it until I got what I wanted.”

Sakura was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then she nodded.

“I’ll keep it in mind, so long as you promise not to interfere.” She said at length. “Is it a deal?”

“Oh, I won’t interfere.” Ryoko said with a shrug. “If you’re not strong enough to tell him yourself, I’m not going to play nurse and do it for you.”

Her eyes twinkled.

“I won’t promise not to tease you, though, so be prepared for that.” She warned. “I’ve never really had a girl friend to banter with like this, and I’m kind of liking the experience.”

“Lucky me.” Sakura groaned, but there was a smile on her face. “I get to be your guinea pig in the world of Earth girl social circles.”

“You should consider yourself privileged. I was a high profile space criminal, once upon a time.” Ryoko grinned.

“You might want to keep that to yourself a bit this afternoon, if we’re really going back to mine after this.” Sakura reflected. “Just in case.”

“You think your family’s not of the pro-alien persuasion?”

“I don’t know. I’ve not discussed it with them, because I didn’t want them to wonder why I was so interested in the subject.” Sakura admitted. “They still have no idea I left the planet with you and Tenchi and visited Jurai and Yousai. It’s not the sort of thing you can easily slip into conversation, so I’ve left well alone.”

“Well, I’ll be on my best behaviour.” Ryoko promised. “No magic, no explosions, nothing out of the ordinary. You have my word.”

# Chapter 6

---

## Chapter Six

“So, welcome to Project Eradicate.”

Kenichi’s eyes glittered with humour as he pushed open the door of the plush, penthouse office, ushering his companion inside as he slid the door shut behind them. “At least, it probably has a far more official name than that now — but that’s what I like to call it. You won’t regret it, Kane-kun — just think of the service you’re doing for all of Earth’s people, while you’re earning your paycheque.”

“For all of Earth’s people.” Kane’s eyes narrowed, his mind flitting back to the report his friend had shown him that day in the park. “No kidding. Letting Space Pirates run riot across this planet is like giving a homicidal maniac a gun and wishing him a good day. How can anyone be so stupid as to trust in her — or in any of them? Masaki must have his brain screwed in wrong — it’s complete madness!”

“He probably doesn’t know as much as you or I do.” Kenichi dropped down into an empty chair, casting him a grin. “Father knows you’re coming, by the way — he’ll be here as soon as he gets out of his meeting. When I told him I had a good friend who was interested in the same things we were, he was glad to have you come here — he reckons that as many people as we can enlist, the better. This may turn out to be a war, at the end of the day — when they attack us, we don’t want to be unprepared.”

“Or if we can prevent an attack altogether.” Kane said quietly. “You didn’t see the nightclub fire, Ishida. That noone died was a miracle. If what these monsters are capable of is worse than that...”

“Much worse and more, I’m afraid, my son.”

At that moment the partition door separating the office from a rear corridor slid back, revealing a man in his middle forties, hair beginning to show the first signs of grey and his dark eyes behind black rimmed spectacles. He wore a smart, expensive suit, and at the sight of Kane, he offered a broad smile.

“Well, Kane-kun. And it’s been some time, hasn’t it? I didn’t realise that you were the friend Kenichi mentioned.”

“Kane’s been intimately acquainted with the alien problem, shall

we say.” Kenichi said with a lazy smile. “His friend has been rather seduced by one — by the Ryoko pirate girl your people have been researching. Apparently he also saw the fire in the nightclub downtown — all in all, he’s probably better positioned to speak about the situation than I am, considering he’s met the *problem* face to face.”

“Literally.” Kane clenched and unclenched his fists, nodding his head. “Ryoko is a menace, of that I’m completely certain. But Ishi... but Kenichi-kun showed me the reports of the other pirate — Haki — and the things that he’s done, too. This is a real threat to us, isn’t it, Ishida-san? We’re really in a dangerous position.”

“It’s hard to really know who to trust and who not to.” The elder Ishida nodded his head, sinking down into a seat behind his desk as he nodded his head. “Although I have to tell you, we’re not without allies. Many governments are embracing these aliens publically, but investigating them privately. It’s by no means a whitewash — even here in Japan, my sources indicate that they’re keeping close tabs on those of the settler people they’re aware of. People such as Professor Hakubi — the scientist who helped develop Earth’s new defences. So far, of course, people such as she have proven useful to this planet, and have posed us no particular danger — for that reason, the United Nations are willing to keep using her and her talents if and when it should prove necessary. However...”

“However, there are others.” Kenichi said meaningfully. “And then there’s that planet. Jurai.”

“Jurai.” Kane’s eyes narrowed. “Isn’t that the world which Masaki’s alien comes from, or some such thing?”

“That’s a little hazy... there doesn’t seem to be that much information on Ryoko’s background in the Galaxy Police files, although it could simply be that we’re not being given all the data.” Ishida senior shrugged his shoulders. “Kane-kun, you and my son have been friends a long time, I know that. But this is a risky, tricky business... and you need to be aware of that before you become any more involved than you are. There are people — operatives — from many countries around the world forming an alliance, and the purpose of this alliance is quite simple — to eradicate dangerous alien life from our planet, and to restrict and control the actions of any we deem safe to remain. These people — some of them — have very deadly powers that people here do not. If you become involved... there is always a risk. And of course, there is also the matter of ultimate discretion. On these two points... if you don’t believe you can be one hundred percent committed — we should end this discussion

now.”

Kane hesitated for a moment at the gravity in the man’s tone, then he nodded.

“I’m committed.” He said frankly, as images of his confrontation with Tenchi flitted through his brain. “I’m not so easily fooled as Masaki and some of the other idiots around the place — I know that Ryoko woman is a threat and I’m sure that she’s not alone. I’m with you with this one hundred percent, Ishida-san. Just tell me what I can do.”

“Ah, you’re just as decisive and strong a young man as I remember.” Ishida senior’s eyes twinkled at this, and he nodded, gesturing for his son to lock the door. Kenichi did so, and Ishida sr. pulled open the drawer of his desk, extracting some folders and dropping them down onto the wooden surface. He flicked open the first one, pulling out some documents.

“Then you need to know as much as we do.” He said softly. “You’re in a good position, because you’ve met the aliens in close contact — you know a little bit about them, and I’m sure you could find out more, if you were willing to pay particular attention. But let me give you the background — what the general belief is now, after having pieced together all the filtered information from our people in the Galaxy Police.”

Kane nodded slowly.

“I’m listening.” He said evenly.

“Firstly, you were there the night of the fire in downtown Osaka, you’ve said that yourself.” Ishida sr. selected a glossy image from his pile, pushing it across the desk towards the young graduate. “This man... do you think you’ve seen him before?”

Kane glanced at the photo, and his eyes widened.

“Seiryō Tennan.” He murmured. “The Galaxy Police Officer, the one who...”

“Came hunting Tenchi Masaki and the Space Pirate Ryoko.” Ishida nodded. “Yes, that’s what I thought... it’s good to have a firm confirmation.”

“He was involved in the fire in the club too.” Kane said, touching the picture absently with his index finger. “But he came on Galaxy Police business — didn’t he? And aren’t you saying that the Galaxy Police are our allies in this? That they’re hunting the pirates too —



and that some of them are Earth-born, so want to protect this world as much as we do?”

“It’s not so simple.” Ishida shook his head. “You have to realise, Kane, that the Galaxy Police is what it sounds like — an intergalactic conglomeration of races, species and nationalities, from planets all over the universe. To many of them, Earth is just another backwards rock — some don’t even know we exist. The few who do are people we’re coming to rely on — however, how much their loyalty has been tainted by time in space it’s impossible to say.”

“So... what about this man?” Kane asked. “This Tennan man. What about him?”

“Well, it’s interesting.” Ishida rubbed his chin. “According to my sources — Seiryō Tennan is no longer a member of the Galaxy Police. And furthermore, there was no official raid on the Earth by the Galaxy Police at the time that he and his ship were sighted here.”

“What?” Kane paled. “But...”

“Equally, in official terms, the Space Pirate Ryoko is currently under probationary pardon.” Ishida added. “Therefore there have been no attempts to hunt her down by them for some time.”

“He didn’t come after Ryoko — he came after Masaki.” Kane said softly. “I remember — he fought Ryoko, but he... he wanted Tenchi. He... he called him by name.”

“He called him by name...” Ishida reflected. “That’s interesting also. I’ve not been able to find out anything much about Tenchi Masaki and what his connection is to all of this. For an ordinary Earth boy, the Galaxy Police seem to be quite closed-lipped on him. Equally, none of them know why Seiryō Tennan should have been compelled to come to the Earth seeking him, without the confirmation or backing of the organisation. There are rumours... many, many rumours. But I think... no, I prefer not to put stock in rumours over fact. And there is one piece of fact that I find very compelling... considering how much we’ve been told that Jurai are now our protective allies.”

“Which is?” Kane set the picture aside.

“Seiryō Tennan is Juraian.” Ishida admitted. “And more — from what I can gather — he’s an *important* Juraian. He’s not just another space cop — he’s titled nobility in some position of authority on his home planet. A close ally of the Emperor, even — and a personal representative of the Emperor’s younger niece — the Lady Sasami.”

“Which implies that a conspiracy is stinking its way through the

universe.” Kenichi said frankly, as Kane stared. “Yep, Kyoda-kun, you’re putting the pieces together — shut your jaw though, huh, and put your mind in gear? Seiryō Tennen is a Juraian. He attacked the Earth and it wasn’t on Galaxy Police orders. So it must have been on Juraian ones. Which means...”

“All this pretence of friendship is a blatant farce. A definite hoax, even from that moment.” Kane gritted his teeth. “That they tried to frighten us into submission — or they set us up so that we would believe Jurai were coming to our rescue. All of that on television — the fight in the mountains, the words of that Princess girl... it’s all been a carefully constructed drama? Is that what you’re saying? That Seiryō Tennen — and maybe even that Ryoko witch — did this for Jurai’s benefit, in order to make the Earth a better candidate for colonisation?”

“That’s what it looks like.” Ishida agreed. “Now you see why I talk in such forbidding terms about what all of this means. These are not stupid people — if we can even call them people. They are arrogant and more, they have a long history of colonising unsuspecting planets.”

“Which means we probably have to kill them, if they come here, before they can do anything to hurt us.” Kenichi said casually.

“And get them angry at us?” Kane stared. Ishida smiled.

“I’m glad you’re not as impetuous as my son, Kyoda.” He said reflectively. “But Kenichi does have a point. At least, we have to be very careful about who and what we trust in, at least until we have a better awareness. My feeling is that if Jurai are going to make a move, this Tennen man may resurface... or one of the Princesses, as some kind of gesture of friendship. They are young women, but from all I’ve heard about this Ryoko — I don’t think we can assume they’re at all delicate, fragile or helpless. They may be as much demons as she is. I’ve certainly heard that the Juraians at least revere the younger girl as something like a Goddess — for whatever bizarre reasons of their own, I’m sure. But it pays to be well prepared.”

He smiled at Kane.

“I need you to keep an eye on these people.” He said softly. “If you can.”

“You want me to patch up my fight with Masaki?” Kane looked startled. “And then spy on them for you?”

“Can you?” Kenichi asked, and Kane hesitated. Then, slowly, he

nodded.

“I can try.” He said frankly. “If all of this is at stake... I... I can try.”

So, planet Jurai at last.

Kiyone stepped pensively down onto the smooth surface of the docking bay, casting a glance back at Yagami as she sealed the security locks, preparing the craft for a potentially lengthy stay as she contemplated the conversation she had had with Mihoshi before leaving headquarters.

“Your friend is probably feeling pretty sucky.” The blond woman had observed, in between bites of raw fish. “So if you want to stay there a while, it’s all right. I can cover for you, you know, and I’m getting really good at the training we’ve been doing. It will be all right and I won’t tell the Chief where you’re gone, I promise. Not a word. You can count on me.”

“I hope I can, but either way, I don’t see what else I could’ve done.” Kiyone sighed, shrugging her shoulders as she reached in her belt for her badge, flashing it at the Juraian security patrols as they saluted her and wished her safe conduct within the protected zone. “At least that’s one thing — the Galaxy Police are generally so under Jurai’s thumb that they don’t mind us coming here to visit. It would be a lot more complicated if I’d had to get clearance — I don’t want to have Seiryō’s situation broadcasted across all of the security systems this planet possesses. Although I’m sure people know, I can’t think that he’d want all of that attention.”

She stepped into a transport car, keying in absently the pass code as she waited to be taken down to the surface proper, drumming her fingers impatiently on the perspex window as she gazed out across the planet’s perfect, carefully designed landscape. In the distance, the royal Tenju tree soared above everything else, and absently Kiyone wondered whether or not she might steal a visit with her royal friends whilst she was on their home world.

“I suppose it depends how everything is with the Tennans.” She reflected. “I’ve never seen Seiryō look quite like... that before. Like he didn’t know where he was or what he was doing. I know he loved his mother a lot... I guess we’ll see how much comfort my company really is to him after all.”

She eyed her reflection in the steel of the car with a rueful grimace.

“I’m not cut out for comforting, more interrogation.” She admitted

aloud to herself. "But this is going to have to be an exception. For all his power and influence, I'm not sure Seiryō has many people he can count on just as friends... if he called me over everyone, then I guess he probably doesn't. So I'm going to have to be it, and hope for the best. At least Mihoshi didn't insist on coming along. She's got a more sympathetic heart than me, but she's so prone to being tactless, I'd be afraid of what she might say."

At length the car stopped and she stepped out into the Juraian atmosphere, making her way across the lush, green landscape in the direction of the Tennan estate. It had been a while since she had visited her friend's home, since most recently they had encountered one another by means of spacecraft, but little had changed in the time she had been away.

"But then not much does change on Jurai, ever." She mused to herself. "When you've got a stable magical and political situation, why bother?"

"Kiyone-neesan! Kiyone-neesan! You've come!"

An excited voice made her pause, turning to see an excited figure hurrying towards her, robes flying and brown hair whipping out around her face as she headed across the grass. As she reached the Detective's side, the newcomer grabbed Kiyone by the hands, squeezing them tightly.

"Nii-chan said you were coming, and you have." She whispered. "You've come to Jurai."

"Tokimi." Kiyone's expression softened, and she nodded, offering the girl a warm smile. "Yes. To see him, mostly, but you and Suki, too. Did you come to meet me?"

Tokimi nodded.

"Nii-chan said you would come, so Tokimi waited for you." She said simply, slipping her arm through the Detective's as if it was the most natural thing in the world for Galaxy Police officers to turn up on Jurai for a social call. "Tokimi wanted to see Kiyone-neesan too. And talk. Talk very much... before Nii-chan talks."

"Talk?" Kiyone paused, casting Tokimi a surprised look as she took in the gravity in the girl's blue eyes. "Something I should know?"

Tokimi hesitated, then shook her head.

"Nii-chan hurts a lot." She said sadly. "Tokimi has not seen Nii-chan hurt like this before. But he is... alone in the gardens. And he is

not... talking to Tokimi. Or Suki. He is... Tokimi is worried. Nii-chan... loved Lady Kaede very much.”

“Yes, I know.” Kiyone’s expression became clouded, and she nodded his head. “He seemed very dazed, when I spoke to him. That’s why I came — because I thought he might need some support. I know he’s a very strong person, Tokimi-chan — and he probably thinks he has to be so for you both, too, at the moment. But he’s pig-headed arrogant about such things from time to time, and I had a feeling he might try and... and shut it out, if he could. It isn’t good for him to do that — so you and I, we’ll have to find a way to make him talk.”

“Yes.” Tokimi nodded her head in agreement, a flicker of hope in her blue eyes. “I am glad you came, Kiyo-neesan. Tokimi can help fix some hurts. But not this hurt. This hurt is... bad hurt. And Tokimi knows... Tokimi knows it can make you... very sad. Very angry. And do bad things, if you let it stay.”

Kiyone pursed her lips.

“I don’t think Seiryō will let it go that far, but you’re right about him bottling it up.” She said at length. “It’s all right, Tokimi. I’ll see what I can do. He doesn’t have to be strong for me, after all.”

“Kiyo-neesan has not visited Jurai in a while.” Tokimi said thoughtfully. “Why not? Why don’t you come to see Tokimi and Nii-chan and Sasami on Jurai?”

“I have to work... I’m only here now because it’s such a situation as it is.” Kiyone said ruefully. “Why? You can’t miss my company, surely? The last two times we’ve been in contact with one another, bad things have almost happened to you. Surely it’s better when I’m not around?”

“Tokimi likes Kiyo-neesan.” Tokimi shrugged, smiling in her happy-go-lucky, serene way. “That’s all. Kiyo-neesan should come to Jurai more. People here like Kiyo-neesan a lot, too. Not just Tokimi. Sasami does, and Suki, and Nii-chan does. And everyone. So you should come to Jurai.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Kiyone said with a grin. “All right?”

“All right.” Tokimi nodded her head.

“Seiryō’s at home, I trust?”

“Yes.” Tokimi chewed on her lip. “He wanted to... to go to the palace this morning, but Suki said to him no. Sasami says Nii-chan should not, too. That he should get better first, before he works. But

Nii-chan wants to work. Tokimi... Tokimi thinks Nii-chan is afraid to be at home. With Kaede-sama. With memories. With bad, sad thoughts. Nii-chan wants to run away from them, Kiyo-neesan. Tokimi understands this, but it is not good. Tokimi... Tokimi ran away when Otousan died. Tokimi did bad things and was very sad, very ill, very big problem for Washu-neechan and everyone. Tokimi loves Nii-chan and doesn't like this to happen to him... so Nii-chan must get better first, before he tries to work again."

"No kidding." Kiyone nodded her head. "I understand how he feels too, Tokimi."

She frowned for a moment, then,

"I've been there too." She admitted slowly. "When I was eighteen or nineteen, I lost my older brother Keitaro. And I suppose I did run away from it — in a manner of speaking. I haven't been home a lot since then — it's just not a place I like to be, when he's not there any more to make me laugh. So I don't visit my family as much as I could do."

"Kiyo-neesan's nii-chan died?" Tokimi's eyes widened in horrified surprise, and Kiyone nodded.

"It was a long time ago now, but yes, he did." She agreed absently. "That was the first case I ever solved, you know, for the Galaxy Police."

"Tokimi didn't know." Tokimi looked solemn, and she squeezed Kiyone's hand. "Tokimi is sorry for Kiyo-neesan's grief... that Kiyo-neesan doesn't speak to family because of it."

"Well, like I said, it was a long time ago." Kiyone shrugged her shoulders. "And I think Seiryō's family matters more to him than mine ever really has to me — even if that sounds awful. Kei-nii was the bridge between me and them, in some ways — the thing we had in common. I don't think that's true of Seiryō, you and Suki. You're a proper family — you're not quite like mine. But I do know how he's feeling, sort of. And he's stubborn enough to pull away, but I'm sure inside he's hurting a lot, just like you said."

Tokimi nodded again, and Kiyone could see that her gentle companion was digesting this. They walked in silence for a while, but as they reached the gates of the Tennan estate, the Kii raised her expressive sapphire eyes to Kiyone's own, offering her a smile.

"Tokimi thinks Kiyo-neesan is a good thing to come to Jurai for Nii-chan." She said softly. "Nii-chan trusts Kiyo-neesan. Is friend of Kiyo-

neesan. Nii-chan... does not like friends. He does not... people on Jurai... he does not like them. But he likes Kiyo-neesan. He respects Kiyo-neesan. I think... Tokimi *knows* Kiyo-neesan will help Nii-chan heal. And then it will be well again. Kaede-sama can sleep in peace with Tokimi's flowers and Tsunami's blessing and everything will be okay."

She tilted her head, a confidential look crossing her face.

"Tokimi made promise to Kaede-sama to make sure Nii-chan was all right." She added. "Tokimi promised. Kaede-sama asked Tokimi, 'Make sure my son doesn't grieve too much for me, because it's my time to go join his father and he has a life still to lead.' And Tokimi promised. Tokimi gave her word."

"You were fond of Kaede-sama too, huh?" Kiyone asked, and Tokimi nodded again.

"She was kind to Tokimi. Let her stay, and talked to her, when Tokimi brought her flowers for her room." She agreed. "Tokimi found many good flowers for Kaede-sama's spirit, too. She is happy, now. At peace, now. But Nii-chan cannot see that, so Nii-chan still hurts."

She gave her companion's hand a little tug, and despite herself, Kiyone felt a moment of apprehension as she glanced towards the front entrance of the impressive Juraian estate.

"Kiyo-neesan is coming?" Tokimi asked quizzically, and Kiyone nodded, pushing her doubts aside.

"I am." She agreed. "I'm here, because like you, I made a promise. I promised to come, so let's go, Tokimi. I'll help you keep your promise to Lady Kaede, if I can."

"I know." Tokimi's eyes lit up. "Tokimi has faith in Kiyo-neesan. All will be all right now you're here — Tokimi is sure!"

With that she skipped off ahead to open the door, and Kiyone followed at a more leisurely pace, not wholly convinced that her Kii companion's faith was entirely justified.

"Sometimes she sees things so simply." She reflected with a sigh. "But she has a lot of heart, and right now, Seiryō probably needs that more than anything."

"Kiyone?"

As she entered the front hall of the house, a voice called her name and she glanced up to see her friend watching her from the foot of the stairs. She swallowed her misgivings at his expression, gathering her

resolve and stepping forward, holding out her hands to clasp his.

“Seiryō.” She said softly. “I said I’d come, and here I am.”

“You didn’t need to come all this way because of me.” Seiryō said quietly, but from the flicker in his teal eyes Kiyone knew that he was glad to see her. “I don’t want you in trouble with Command.”

“I don’t care. They owe me leave time and besides, some things are important to me other than work, these days.” Kiyone said lightly. “Don’t start worrying about me, when I’m here to help you.”

She cast him a glance, offering him a smile.

“You look a little better than you did when we spoke.” She added, and Seiryō’s lips twitched into a humourless, ironic smile.

“I suppose that’s a good thing.” he said evenly. “I was just heading to the memorial, to pay my respects. Will you... are you tired from your trip, or will you accompany me? Suki has already been, and Tokimi too. Now I must, or risk disrespecting someone who was important to me, although I confess I’m not anxious to do it quite so soon.”

“Surely that would be intruding on your time with your mother?” Kiyone asked softly. Seiryō shook his head.

“I think I’d prefer the company.” He admitted. “If you don’t mind the trek.”

“Then I’ll come with pleasure.” Kiyone nodded. “I’m not at all tired.”

Seiryō glanced at her for a moment, then at Tokimi, and a look passed between them that seemed to convey some secret, private message. Then the nobleman bowed his head in Kiyone’s direction.

“I appreciate your coming more than you know.” He said softly. “The mausoleum is only a short walk away, and really, your company will be more than welcome.”

“Lead the way.” Kiyone offered him a smile. “Let’s go.”



# Chapter 7

---

## Chapter Seven

“Well, I told you it would be nice to do this. Quiet and peaceful and a beautiful view across the valley.”

Ryoko kicked her legs idly against the trunk of the tree, turning to send her companion a playful smile as she settled back against the branches. “Don’t you think so? It’s something different, anyway — I like bringing you into my world and we never do things like this. Not really.”

“If by ‘like this’ you mean sitting up in a tree at half nine at night eating fish and rice, then yes, I guess we don’t.” Tenchi cast an apprehensive glance down at the ground below. “Are you sure we’re safe up here? I know that this branch is pretty sturdy... but I’m still not sure that this was the best idea you ever had.”

It was later in the evening and, after having returned from Osaka, Ryoko had convinced her fiance that a night out would be good for the both of them. It was a clear spring night, and so Tenchi had agreed — although he had begun to have second thoughts as soon as he had realised exactly what was on the pirate’s mind.

“Really?” Ryoko looked surprised now at his doubtful expression. “You’re not looking in the right direction, Tenchi. Stop staring at the grass and look at where we are. There’s nowhere in the whole of the mountains that has as good a view as this.”

She cupped her hand around his cheek, lifting his head up and gesturing across the horizon towards the forests and settlements that panned out beneath them. “See? On top of the world. Tell me that isn’t amazing, Tenchi?”

“I suppose it is.” Despite himself, a smile touched Tenchi’s lips. “I’m sorry. I’m just not used to tree climbing.”

“Ironic, since you’re a Prince of Jurai.” Ryoko said playfully. “Are you trying to tell me you’re not enjoying this even a little bit?”

“Well, I suppose... a bit.” Tenchi grinned ruefully. “Sorry. I’ll try and stop being a spoilsport. Just when you said we’d eat out tonight it wasn’t quite what I thought you meant.”

“I like surprises. Ordinary dates bore me, you know that.” Ryoko’s

eyes twinkled. "I did tell you life with me wasn't dull, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did." Tenchi acknowledged. "And yet we're still getting married. Which one of us is the mad one, Ryoko?"

"Having spent a lot of time listening to Sakura this afternoon on the subject of clothing, I think it's me." Ryoko sighed, rolling her eyes skywards. "And I thought going back to her parents house was going to be a simple social occasion — apparently I was wrong. I'm not going to bore you with the details — actually, I tuned out half way through — but apparently it's not just a case of getting out of bed, pulling on something pretty and waltzing into the scene. Let's just say that if I understood one word in three of the things she told me I was doing well. And she did insist on showing me all those photos of her sister's wedding, too. The girl looked like norimaki — I'm amazed she didn't asphyxiate before the ceremony was done. If I dress like that for our wedding, Tenchi-kun, you're going to have to unwrap me before we can do anything fun — talk about ruining the mood!"

"I think it's funny, how much time you spend with Sakura." Tenchi laughed. "It's so unlike you really — going into girly huddles over things like clothing and make-up and all of those things."

"Well, I know." Ryoko looked pensive. "It's weird, but nice, too. I mean, you don't know anything about Earth girl things. Washu and Yume aren't much good for those things, either... and I hate to think what your father knows about women's undergarments. I like Sakura. She's helpful and she doesn't mind the fact I'm not from round here, not any more. So I guess I shouldn't moan about her being my wedding coach — or at least, that's what she called it. At least she has a vague clue what a Japanese wedding is supposed to be. I'm not quite sure myself."

"You could ask Dad about that." Tenchi pointed out.

"Yeah, if I wanted to know about weddings twenty years or more ago." Ryoko grimaced. "Besides, he's still hung up on your Ma a whole lot and I don't want to drag it out for him. Grown men crying isn't pretty unless you've been inflicting serious physical pain... and sometimes I'm not sure where he stands on that issue."

"Physical... pain?" Tenchi echoed teasingly, and Ryoko blushed.

"In a purely piratical sense." She said, dismissing it with a flick of her hand. "That's kind of different — then you get a kick out of them crying for their mummies."

"You..." Tenchi shook his head, amused. "Sometimes I forget you

were a hardened space criminal in a past life. And then other times I really don't."

"I'm a girl with multiple facets." Ryoko said coquettishly. "Just think, you've got so many more of them to discover as time goes on."

"I don't know whether to be happy or scared." Tenchi laughed, slipping his hand into hers, squeezing it tightly. "But I've weathered them so far. I can keep going and hope for the best."

"Good choice." Ryoko winked. She pushed the basket that had held their evening snack onto a nearby branch, dusting stray specks of onigiri from her clothing as she did so. "Yume makes good food, doesn't she? I have to admit, for a robot, she doesn't do bad."

"She seems to get a kick out of it, so I guess we're all set in the domestic stakes." Tenchi agreed. "It's nice for Dad not to have to worry about it, and you and I are no good. So thank goodness Dr Clay had other uses for her than just to impersonate people. Otherwise we'd spend a whole lot of time at the local take-away."

"I hate to think what those other uses were." Ryoko shuddered. "Working our kitchen almost seems a respite, in comparison."

"She's happy enough." Tenchi reproached her.

"Well, that's because she's doing things for you, Tenchi-kun." Ryoko teased, looping her arms around his neck and taking him off-guard. "It's some knack you have, I guess — women dropping at your feet, willing to do anything you ask..."

"Ryoko, be careful!" Tenchi wobbled on the branch, reaching out to steady himself as he sent his fiancée a look of alarm. "You'll have us both out of here. And stop teasing me. Women do not drop at my feet... that's crazy!"

"You know that they do." Ryoko objected. "Me included, I suppose. Otherwise how do you suppose a wicked, butt-kicking space-pirate would wind up spending her afternoon discussing wedding plans with a romance-mad earthling? That's your fault, you know. *You* did that to me."

"I love you too." Tenchi retorted, and Ryoko grinned.

"Good." She said complacently. "Because there's something I want to do for you right now, you know. And well, you wouldn't want to hurt my feelings, now would you?"

"What are you talking about?" Tenchi eyed her cautiously. "What game are you playing now, Ryoko? Because I'm not very secure on

this branch, and I don't think it'll take too much messing around."

"Oh, it's fine. I've sat up here a million times before and it's strong as anything." Ryoko assured him carelessly. "You worry way too much, Tenchi. Way, way too much."

She kissed him gently, meeting his startled gaze with a mischievous one of her own.

"Let's test it." She whispered. "After the day that I've had, I need to relax and you're so tense, Tenchi. You need to chill out, too."

"Ryoko..." Tenchi began, but Ryoko pressed a finger to his lips, shaking her head.

"Don't argue with me." She murmured. "We're all alone and it would be a kick, don't you think so? We're up in the wilds of this beautiful planet, high above it all. Would it be so very bad? After all, we are going to get married. It's not like it's wrong."

"Ryoko, we're up a tree!" Tenchi managed to wriggle out of her grasp, but she just laughed, rifling her fingers through his thick dark hair.

"You need to be less conservative. More open-minded." She reproached. "Come on, Tenchi. At least kiss me, will you? It's too nice a night to waste it by just sitting and talking."

"Ryoko..."

"You're still chatting." Ryoko warned him. "You're not listening to me."

"But I..."

"But nothing." Ryoko kissed him once more, sliding her hands across his shoulders as she resumed her grasp on him, pressing closer to his body as she did so. Tenchi's resistance began to wane as the kiss became deeper, and he was only distantly aware that she was now more than half sitting on top of him, pushing him up against the trunk of the sturdy tree. He felt the tie of his jacket loosen and slip from around his waist, but somehow the reasons he had given before for refusing seemed to have faded from his mind as his emotions overwhelmed him. He ran his fingers through her hair and then down across Ryoko's back, running over the smooth fabric of her gown.

"And this is a short cut through to the top of the main path. It's really very useful, to get to the shrine easily."

A voice from the ground below startled him back to alertness and

he jumped, overbalancing on the branch with a wild yell as he slid across the wood and over the edge. Ryoko made a desperate grab to stop his descent, missing by mere inches as she steadied herself in the tree, preventing her own body from falling headlong. Tenchi tumbled into a heap on the soft grass below, falling right into the path of two elderly women who stared at him with a mixture of uncertainty and alarm.

Tenchi scrambled to his feet, his jacket catching on the trunk of the tree as he did so and pulling clean off as he struggled to regain his composure. His cheeks flushed red as he grabbed wildly for the garment, meeting the gaze of the two women with an awkward grin. A snort from overhead alerted him to the fact his fiancée was thoroughly enjoying the entire spectacle and somehow it didn't make him feel any better. Suddenly he realised how stupid the whole situation was — and he struggled to find words to explain what had happened to the startled walkers.

“There's a really beautiful view from the top of the tree.” He said finally, scratching his head in embarrassment as he did so. A fresh outbreak of noise from overhead told him Ryoko had appreciated his explanation, and he gritted his teeth, determined not to look upwards and give away the fact he had not been alone. Hastily he pulled his jacket back on, tying it firmly and wishing that he had been wearing more underneath it before Ryoko had dragged him out for their mountainside rendezvous.

For a moment there was silence, then one of the women smiled at him, a little doubtfully.

“Well, and if it isn't the good priest's grandson.” She said lightly. “Hello, Tenchi-san. Mountain walking and tree climbing have become hobbies now, have they?”

“Oh yes. Yes. I... I got into it at college.” Tenchi thought quickly. “You know how it is, all that studying... well, it's nice to just get away and appreciate the countryside.”

More smothered giggles from above, and Tenchi kicked the tree surreptitiously, inwardly urging his companion to at least keep silent. After all, he realised with some horror, he did indeed recognise one of the women as a shrine regular, and he knew exactly what his grandfather would say if he knew what the lady had almost interrupted.

“I thought you went to college in Osaka.” The woman looked confused.

“Uh... yes.” Tenchi admitted unwillingly. “But it was... extra-curricular. We did, you know, field trips.”

“Ah, well, colleges offer everything these days.” The woman’s friend observed with a warm smile. “And I believe you can see some wonderful wildlife at this time of night, up here in the mountains.”

“Yes, you can definitely see some rare species all right.” Tenchi said darkly. “Some interesting *birds* live in these trees.”

“I must walk here more often, then.” The woman’s eyes twinkled. “It was nice to meet you, Tenchi-san. Come on, Yasuko... we mustn’t dawdle or your husband will be wondering where we are.”

“Yes, sister... you’re right, and we must.” Yasuko nodded her widened head. She bowed solemnly in Tenchi’s direction, then, “Send my best regards to your grandfather, Tenchi-san... and I shall no doubt see him in the next few days.”

“Yes, ma’am. Of course.” Tenchi bowed hastily. “I’ll do that.”

The women moved on, and once they were out of earshot, Tenchi sank back against the tree with a heavy sigh.

“Ryoko, get down here, now!” He called. “You might find this funny, but I really don’t!”

“Oh, Tenchi, you are such a stick in the mud.” Ryoko materialised in front of him, touching down daintily on the grass as she put a finger to his cheek. “I was mad at those biddies for interrupting our alone time, but you know, it was the funniest thing I’ve seen in a long time. You dropping in front of them like that — I’m amazed you didn’t give either of them a heart attack.”

“Ryoko!” Tenchi glowered at her, and Ryoko laughed, kissing him playfully on the forehead.

“They didn’t know I was there, so Ojii-san will never know.” She said softly. “They do say old women make the best chaperones and I always thought they were talking about Washu, but I guess I need to re-think my ideas, don’t I?”

“You’re enjoying this way too much, you know.”

“Well, I needed a good laugh.” Ryoko said playfully.

“I told you a tree wasn’t a good place to, well, do stuff!”

“Maybe you’re right, but it was worth a shot.” Ryoko linked her hand in his. “Oh, Tenchi, don’t be mad. I’m sorry you fell out of the tree but you’re not hurt and those women didn’t know why you were

really up there. So it's all fine, really."

Tenchi sighed, pursing his lips. Then he met her gaze, and despite himself a smile touched his lips.

"I guess it was kind of funny." He admitted. Ryoko laughed.

"It seems the fates want me to be a chaste and innocent bride after all." She said flippantly. "I'll go up and get the basket — the mood is ruined, so we should probably get back to the house."

"Chaste and... innocent?" Tenchi stared. "Shouldn't you have thought about that before you took advantage of me in Osaka? And here? And anywhere else you've managed to pin me down?"

"You make me sound completely insatiable." Ryoko objected. "Now you're a graduate, we don't have a place in Osaka to flit around so much, and we don't get as much chance to be alone. Can you blame me for taking advantage? Forgive me for not wanting to seduce you when my mother and your father are downstairs."

"No, I know." Tenchi pursed his lips. "Although you *do* want to keep living here, right?"

"Yes." Ryoko nodded. "I love the mountains and that house is home — it has good memories and well, I spent my first night on Earth in that place. I just think we need somewhere where we can have alone time too, that's all. So maybe up a tree isn't your thing — but it's cool. We've time to try something else."

"Sometimes you amaze me." Tenchi chuckled. "Get the basket down, huh? And next time you have a bright idea, if it involves a tree, then don't bother asking me, all right? I don't want to get a reputation!"

Ryoko laughed appreciatively, nodding her head.

"All right, Tenchi-kun." She said softly. "It's a deal."

As she hovered upwards into the branches to retrieve the basket, Tenchi was aware of a bleeping from his pocket and he frowned, sliding his fingers into his jeans as he pulled out his cellphone, glancing at it in surprise.

"And I thought I'd turned that off for the night. Who's calling me this late?" He wondered, peering at the display. His brows knitted further as he recognised the number, and for a moment, he debated not answering. Then, with a sigh, he pressed the 'receive' button, taking a few steps away from the tree as he moved out of his fiancée's earshot.

“Masaki.” He said levelly. “Kyoda-san, is that you?”

“Masaki-san.” A pause, then a sigh, and Tenchi frowned at the hesitation in his former classmate’s voice. “It’s late — I was about to give up on you answering.”

“Sorry. I was...” Tenchi faltered, gazing up at the tree branches as he wondered how to explain what exactly he had been doing. ‘I was eating.’ He managed finally, biting his lip. “Though to be honest, I thought I’d turned this off. And I didn’t expect... to hear... from you. After the other night...”

“Yes. I know. Which is why I’m calling you.” Kane admitted, and Tenchi’s eyes widened as he registered a note of contrition in the other man’s voice. “Listen, Masaki. Both of us — we went a little nuts, and for my part, I’m sorry. I mean, I don’t get what you see in that girl, and to be honest, I’m still bothered by what happened in Osaka. But it ain’t really... my business. And we were friends, before all that kicked off. I guess... since we’re graduated now... I wanted to bury the hatchet. And you know, leave things on a clean slate. I’ll get it, if you don’t want to — but I didn’t want to leave things the way they were. When I cooled down, I realised that neither of us really acted like adults back there.”

“Kyoda...” Tenchi faltered, then a smile touched his lips. “No, you’re right. And actually, I appreciate you calling me. I’m sorry for what happened the other night, too — it wasn’t like me to react that way and I feel bad about it as well. In a way, I feel a bit ashamed that I didn’t call you first, but...”

“I said some crappy things about your woman... I guess I’d have understood if you’d thrown the phone off a cliff at the sight of my number.” Kane’s voice echoed with faint irony, and despite himself, Tenchi laughed.

“Maybe.” He agreed. “Look, I know that Ryoko... well, I realise that... well, I’ve known her a lot longer than most people have, and that she’s... from somewhere else. It’s just normal to me now... I guess I need to understand that other folk are still adjusting to the whole deal. We both lost our minds a little, like you said. But... I appreciate the olive branch. I didn’t like leaving things that way, either. Especially now school is done.”

“Are you busy tomorrow?” Kane hazarded. “Because if not, do you think we could meet for lunch? Seal the deal with a proper truce? It’s late now and I’m sure I don’t have enough power on my phone to make this a long, detailed chat. But... I’d like it — if you could. We



haven't talked in a long time, and I realised that that sucks. Just you and me — if you're free?"

"I'm sure I can be." Tenchi's gaze strayed to where Ryoko was carefully trying to disentangle the basket from its resting place. "All right. I'm back in the mountains tonight, so I'll have to get a train — can you meet me at the station at one o' clock? I can be there for then."

"One o' clock it is." Kane sounded relieved. "Thanks, Masaki. I'm glad you were willing to hear me out."

"I'm glad you called." Tenchi responded. "Tomorrow, then. Bye, Kyoda. I'll see you then."

He terminated the call, pursing his lips as he slipped his phone back into his pocket, just as Ryoko gave up on her task, phasing the basket through the branch and dropping down in front of him.

"Who was that?" She asked curiously. 'Did I hear you say "Kyoda"? Tenchi, I thought you were done messing with that idiot... he's never going to get the message, you know."

"Actually, he called me to apologise for the other night." Tenchi shrugged, offering her a smile. "So maybe you've misjudged him."

"Hah." Ryoko snorted. "Well. We'll see. I'm sure his apology doesn't extend as far as me."

"Probably not, at the moment, but he did ask to meet tomorrow, and I've said I'll go." Tenchi reflected.

"You did what?" Ryoko stared at him. "Tenchi, the last time you met, you had a free for all fight in a public place. Are you sure that's a good plan?"

"Yes." Tenchi nodded. "I promise, no fists this time. No matter what's said. Besides, he did sound sorry. And now we're graduated, it'd be nice to clear the air. Even if that is all it is."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"Before you escaped from prison, you know, Kyoda and Kamikura were good friends of mine." He added. "And I don't regret anything I've done regarding you or those choices. But it sucks, to lose friends over a girl. And especially over a girl I'm serious about, like I am you."

"Well, just so you remember that it wasn't *me* who asked you to stop seeing *them*." Ryoko said pointedly. "Go, speak to him, by all

means. Just don't embarrass me by bleeding his nose, all right? I'm already considered to have bewitched you in some quarters. We don't need to make it worse."

"I swear." Tenchi held up his hands. "Thanks, Ryoko. I'm glad you aren't going to be funny about it."

"Well, I think it's a waste of time, but hell, it's your time, not mine." Ryoko shrugged, offering him an impish smile. "I'm a big girl. I can amuse myself for a few hours while you negotiate a peace treaty with Kane Kyoda."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Tenchi said ruefully, slipping his hand into hers as they headed back towards the house. "But if I can leave things on a better note with Kane, then so much to the good. I hate being at odds with anyone, Ryoko-chan... you know that. If I can make peace with at least one of the friends I've estranged, well, it'll be something. And you never know. Maybe I will bring him round, yet."

"I wouldn't hold my breath." Ryoko said reflectively. "But like I said, it's up to you. This is one little boy's feud in which I am *not* getting involved!"

"I confess that I feel a little guilty, with you coming all this way."

As they walked across the grounds towards the Tennan mausoleum, Seiryō shot Kiyone a pensive look. "When I contacted you, I'm not sure what I expected you to do... certainly not fly across the universe."

"Well, you looked... shell-shocked, although that's an understatement." Kiyone sighed, kicking absently at the ground. "I was worried about you. You've this habit of trying to pretend you can handle everything, and I knew you couldn't handle this on your own. So I came."

"Ah, I see." A faint smile flickered at the edges of Seiryō's lips, but it did not reach his eyes, and Kiyone eyed him in concern. "Well, I can relieve you on one account. I can handle a fair amount — but I'm not wholly sure that this is one of those times. I am glad to see you, although it feels selfish to say so. Suki... is dealing with this much more than I. I am being useless, and dragging friends from their posts to come flutter around me. But I... I am glad you are here."

"Then it was right for me to come." Kiyone said evenly. "It's all right. Really. Don't feel bad about it. You're my friend, right?"

"Yes, of course."

“Then that’s what friends do. Isn’t it?”

“I confess, I’ve never spent much time dwelling on that.” Seiryō admitted. “You must be aware that my... my peers on Jurai are not the kind of men or women I seek to spend much social time around if it can be avoided.”

“I meant real friends.” Kiyone scolded. “Not political ones.”

“On Jurai, it can be difficult to see a difference. Another reason why it is good to have someone genuine come to offer condolences.” Seiryō said ruefully. “Enough messages have come from the Council and the court — but most of them do not genuinely care. I would rather they’d kept out of the matter entirely, rather than spread their hypocrisy my way. It means I must reciprocate and thank them, and right now I do not wish to make that kind of contact.”

“I’m sure they’ll understand, if you leave it a while.”

“No... I think not.” Seiryō shook his head. “Just another thing I have to handle, being a peer of Jurai.”

“So tell them to go to hell. I would. It’s not up to them to be offended or otherwise, and you don’t usually care about that.” Kiyone said frankly.

“True.” Seiryō admitted. “But at the moment I am neither thinking nor acting as concisely as usual.”

“That’s understandable. Stop expecting too much of yourself so soon, you idiot... you need time to deal with it too, you know, whatever your noble neighbours think or otherwise.”

“I know. It’s just hard to absorb. That’s all.”

As they reached their destination, Seiryō gazed up at the smooth marble-brick walls, and Kiyone could tell that he was apprehensive about even being here. “Saying goodbye is so hard, when it’s someone you really didn’t get to spend enough time with anyway. Father sent me away from her for so long, Kiyone — time when I should have been here defending her from his vices and protecting her from his dishonour. And now she’s gone, and those years are lost... I don’t know what I feel about it, to be honest. So many things at once — it’s hard to know for sure.”

“I suppose that’s understandable.” Kiyone pursed her lips, eying the ornately carved building with a thoughtful look. “So *all* of your family rest here? Going back generations?”

“Yes, or going back several generations. Perhaps not all of them

back to infinity.” Seiryō nodded, a faint, humourless smile touching his face. “Cold black marble — seems fitting, doesn’t it, for one of the most heartless families on Jurai.”

“I don’t think you’re a heartless family, Seiryō. Look at all you and Suki have done for Tokimi!”

“Perhaps not all Tennans.” Seiryō acknowledged. “Mother certainly wasn’t. In a way, I don’t want her to be here, with Father and all of them. And yet, in another...”

He faltered, then shrugged his shoulders.

“This was where she wanted to be.” He murmured. “She told me so, more than once. She was a Tennan, and this was where she would rest. So it was her will. And that’s what we’ll do.”

“Your mother was a Tennan as well, then? She and your father were related before they married?” Kiyone asked. Seiryō nodded.

“Upper class Juraian are pretty well inbred.” He said ironically. “But they were only distant cousins. Both could trace ancestry back to Senichi Tennan, but the line divided many times in-between. Suki and I are Tennans to the bone... and now, we’re the only ones left to carry on that line.”

“I see.” Kiyone fell silent for a moment, absorbing this. “Someone took a lot of time and care in carving this, you know. To honour a family that meant something.”

“Yes. Their pay cheque, I don’t doubt.” Seiryō agreed flatly. “You might think that someone put blood, sweat and tears into this, but the truth is that some anonymous mason and his apprentices were probably commissioned to do it. That’s how things work, when you have more money than sense. You build grandiose memorial chambers in which your family members get to rot in perpetuity.”

“Hey.” Kiyone sent him a reproachful look, gripping his hand. “Your mother wanted to be here, remember? It’s not like that to all your family. It meant something to her.”

“I suppose so.” Seiryō sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it. “You’re right. I know I keep repeating myself, but I really am glad you’re here, Kiyone. I don’t know why, but I am. It seems easier to talk to you about this than it is to talk to anyone else at the moment. Even my sister... she’s managing so well, with her emotions and the preparations for Mother’s funeral and I’m useless to her — a weight around her neck, to be truthful. I’m lost... for the first time, I have no idea how to act or think or behave. I’ve never lost anyone I loved

before. Never. And I don't know how to react to it."

"I guess there's no firm rule." Kiyone looked thoughtful. "But perhaps you can tell me because we still have a bond, thanks to Tokimi's magic. And maybe because I do understand. I have been in your shoes before."

"You have?" Seiryō looked surprised. "I thought your parents still lived?"

"They do." Kiyone agreed. "But I've never been so very close to either of them. No, I didn't mean that."

"Then what?" Seiryō leant up against the wall of the chamber, casting her a curious look. "That is, if it's something you want to discuss."

"It was a long time ago, it's all right." Kiyone nodded. "I lost a brother I was very close to... it takes time to adjust, when things change."

"I didn't realise you had brothers." Seiryō looked startled. "In truth, I didn't think about you having family at all... aside from your parents. You've mentioned them from time to time."

"Well, where to start with my family." Kiyone looked rueful. "Mother wants her daughter to marry a nice man and become a good little housewife, and father wants to hear about all the wonderful Galaxy Police things I'm doing so he can boast about them to his friends. Then there were five of us — I'm the fourth of five. My older brother and sister are both married with families and homes of their own. Then there was Keitaro, who is the one that I lost. And myself and Mashisu, my younger sister. Also known as a completely shameless hussy of a girl — she's been trying to convince Mihoshi's poor brother to marry her for as long as I can remember. All in all, they're a family I keep my distance from. I don't hate them, but I'm not really like them. So the Galaxy Police became my home and family. Especially when Kei-niichan died. He and I, we rubbed along pretty well... rogue that he was."

"I'm realising there is a lot I don't know about you still, isn't there?" Seiryō observed, and Kiyone shook her head.

"And right now probably isn't the time for any of it." She reminded him gently. "It'll keep."

"Actually, it's nice to know that I'm not the first person to lose someone and feel it so harshly." Seiryō admitted, gazing up towards the sky. "And a distraction of any kind from my empty thoughts is

most welcome, so don't worry on that account."

He eyed her keenly.

"You and your brother must have been very close?"

"We were." A slightly nostalgic smile touched Kiyone's face. "He was four years older than me, and wrapped up in every mischief he could be, in truth. In the end, it got him killed. He trusted in the wrong people and paid for it with his life."

She pursed her lips.

"It was the same year that I graduated from the Police Academy. It was also the first case I solved. I suppose that's how I put my ghosts to rest — bringing justice to my brother allowed me to move on. Even though we were effectively working on different sides of the fence, he always encouraged me to shoot for the moon. He'd joke that one day I'd be reeling him in... well, instead I reeled in the guys that killed him. Seeing them sentenced — that was a good feeling. It was like he was with me, and I know he'd have approved."

"I see." Seiryō fell silent for a moment, digesting this, and Kiyone sent him a sidelong glance.

"I'm babbling at you and you probably don't need it." She realised. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Seiryō dismissed her concern with a faint smile. "Believe me — the diversion is a welcome one."

Kiyone turned her attention back to the mausoleum, biting her lip.

"It's nice to have a monument to remember people by." She mused softly. "I can see why this meant something to Lady Kaede — to be here, with her kin."

"Well, if I have a say in it, this won't be where I wind up." Seiryō said frankly. "But I have to face this, sooner or later. So well, here I am."

"Do you want me to wait outside?" Kiyone asked gently, but Seiryō shook his head.

"No. It's not sacrosanct... and I'd rather not face this alone." He admitted, and Kiyone was struck by the unusually vulnerable tone in her companion's normally composed tones. "If you don't mind being around a dead person, then I don't mind you accompanying me."

"I'm not bothered by it at all." Kiyone assured him as he stepped into the black walled construction, and she followed on behind,

finding herself in a short passageway that had three doors leading off from it — one to the left, one to the right, and one straight ahead. She gazed around her, awe touching her expression as she realised how much work and time had truly gone into building the Tennan family crypt.

“Don’t look so impressed. It’s not that special.” Seiryō’s voice brought her back to earth with a bump. “We go this way. The memorial chamber is straight ahead. Mother believed in Tsunami wholeheartedly, so Priests have already been and embalmed and blessed her body ready for... for when Suki finally has everything straight. But I... I think I might ask Lady Sasami to say words for her, too. After all, she is... closer to the Goddess than any of the rest of us. And in light of that, well, even if the spiritual side of things is beyond me — I know Mother would have liked to know that the Goddess blessed her spirit.”

“I’m sure Sasami will do just that.” Kiyone agreed, following him into the futhermost chamber and stopping dead as she realised it was no small memorial room but almost a shrine or chapel in its own right, bright sunlight gleaming through paned glass windows and pictures and engravings marking each surface. The faint scent of flowers dusted the room, and Kiyone remembered what Seiryō had said about Tokimi. She glanced at him, and he nodded.

“Tokimi has left her mark.” He agreed soberly. “She insisted on decking the entire place out with what she called special flowers — Suki and I let her do as she wanted, because Mother always loved the flowers in the gardens at the Estate. It at least makes this place more cheerful, somehow. Less cold and imposing.”

“And all these pictures mean something.” Kiyone gazed around her, picking out the image of Tsunami that stood out above the rest, her kindly hands outstretched as if greeting the spirits of the departed souls. “I think you’re wrong about this place, Seiryō. It might be made of stone and marble, but I think there’s more to it than just, well, walls. I think people did care about it — and that’s why your mother wanted to be here now.”

“Perhaps.” Seiryō shrugged. “But if you’d been down the steps to the vaults themselves, you might think differently. No, with all my experiences over the past few years, this isn’t the place I want to be when I die. Even if it means turning my back on my family’s traditions — I am not going to be another marble box Tennan corpse.”

There was a faintly bitter note in his voice at these words, and Kiyone eyed him thoughtfully. She made no demur, however, merely

watching as he strode up to the oaken casket that lay carefully on the stone plinth, images and characters that she did not recognise engraved along the sides. Hesitantly she moved to join him, unsure as to what she should do, but when she reached his side, she found he was just standing there, staring down at the silent face of his mother.

Kaede looked like she was sleeping, her pale, thin cheeks peaceful and relaxed, and now that the lines of pain had been smoothed out across her brow, Kiyone realised that her friend's mother had once been very pretty. Someone had styled the rich waves of hair into a neat, elegant fashion, and she was clothed in some of her finest robes — clothes that Kiyone suspected hadn't seen the light of day for many years, but which somehow spoke of the status and internal strength of this physically frail woman. Flowers decked the casket from head to foot, and despite herself, Kiyone smiled. Tokimi had really gone to town, she realised, but the overall effect was one of beauty, not of clutter, and she decided that the late Lady of the Manor would have little to find fault with.

"On Jurai, you really know how to make people's lives memorable." She murmured. "She looks so pretty, Seiryō. So tranquil. I never realised how much Suki looked like her mother, but she really does, doesn't she? The resemblance is very strong."

A strange sound came from her companion and Kiyone glanced up sharply, consternation flooding her features as she registered his expression. Despite his earlier words, tears glistened on his lashes, and he turned away, clearly trying his best to compose himself. Kiyone sighed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You haven't." Seiryō spoke in low, tentative tones, as he battled his emotions. "It's not you. It's this... it's seeing her... like this. Like she's asleep... but she isn't. I really know she isn't, now. Seeing her in this chapel, in the same way that they laid out Father after he died... it makes it real. Mother truly is... is gone. And there was nothing I could do to prevent it... nothing I could do to help her."

He closed his eyes, struggling to prevent the tears from falling and without a word Kiyone took him gently by the hand, leading him slowly away from the casket.

"You don't have to fight it." She said quietly. "Men are allowed to cry, you know. Especially considering the circumstances. I won't think you weak, if you do."

"I *don't* cry." Seiryō said fiercely, clenching his fists. "It's not



something I do... it's a helpless, feeble reaction and it solves nothing! It *changes* nothing!"

"But sometimes it helps." Kiyone said reasonably. "Stop battling, Seiryō. You loved her. What's feeble about that?"

Seiryō eyed his companion in stricken silence, biting his lip, but it was no good. He sank down on the smooth stone bench opposite the altar, burying his head in his hands as his emotions won through. For a moment, Kiyone did not interfere, but then, very carefully, she sat down beside him, sliding a tentative arm around his shoulders.

"I'm not the world's best person at comforting." She said honestly. "But I'll try, if you'll let me."

Seiryō pulled back from her touch, drawing a shaky breath of air into his lungs.

"You can help me best by never telling a soul about this." He said softly, his words muffled behind his hands. "Not ever, do you understand? It might not seem weak to you, but you don't understand... how much I... it's important that..."

"I can keep a secret. I've been keeping the fact we've been having covert training sessions a secret from the Commander for almost a year." Kiyone said frankly. "You don't have to get all defensive on me. I know what you're going through and crying about it isn't the end of the world. All it does is tell your mother that you loved her. That's all. Nothing else."

Seiryō did not reply, and Kiyone got to her feet, moving slowly back towards the casket.

"My elder sister told me that, when Kei-niichan died." She added softly. "I didn't want to cry, then. It seemed weak and I knew nothing could bring him back. But she said that people didn't cry over lost souls just because they had to. It wasn't like that. You only cry proper tears for the people who mean the most. There's no better tribute, when you think about it. That's what my sister told me. So every time I felt sad about Kei-nii's death, I remembered that and tried to believe it."

She turned, looking rueful.

"I'm not one who cries often either. I don't have time for it, it gets in my way." She added. "But there are times, Seiryō, when even the best of us do. So if you don't want me to tell anyone, you know that I won't. But don't be ashamed of it. Kaede-sama knows more than ever now that you loved her. Do you think that, as your mother, she'd ever

ask more of you than that?"

Seiryō raised his gaze to hers, staring at her in speechless silence, and Kiyone nodded.

"Yep, I talk a lot of rubbish sometimes." She acknowledged sheepishly. "But you know, some of it makes sense occasionally."

"You make a lot of sense." Seiryō said quietly. "I didn't know how I'd react when I... I saw her this way. But I'm glad I didn't come alone... I'm glad you came too."

He took a deep breath, then,

"I'm all right now. And I would prefer that noone did get to hear of this." He added. "But thank you, for what you said. I'll try and remember that, from now on."

"Sure." Kiyone grinned, taking him by the hands and pulling him to his feet. "That's why I came, isn't it? To help?"

"Your Commander won't wonder where you are?"

"Mihoshi's going to tell him I had an urgent call away." Kiyone said simply. Seiryō frowned.

"Did you tell her where you really were going?"

"Of course not. I love Mihoshi like a sister, but I don't always trust her tongue." Kiyone shook her head. "I told her I was going to see a friend who needed me, that's all. And that if I wasn't back this evening, well, I'd be back as soon as possible and she wasn't to worry. That I'd be fine."

"You *will* get into trouble, if you don't go back."

"My Commander owes me so many favours of late that I doubt it." Kiyone pursed her lips, looking amused. "Since you started working with me, Mihoshi and I have solved more cases than we ever did before. And that's setting a mean precedent, because I wasn't a bad detective before, either. Just some of the things you learnt as an Elite we never got to study, as regular division detectives. And since going through the training channels the official way would mean leaving her behind..."

"Your loyalty does you credit." Seiryō managed a faint smile. "But I'm glad, in a way, that you chose to do things in the manner that you have. Even after our less than auspicious first encounters, it's given me a chance to get to know you. I really *don't* make many friends — I'm a solitary person as a rule and I don't really need them, most of the

time. But I'm glad we're friends, Kiyone. Strange as our acquaintance has been, I'm glad of it all the same."

"Me too, though Mihoshi and everyone at Headquarters would think me nuts." Kiyone said frankly. "Perhaps I am, who knows? But sometimes I think we're a lot alike."

"For your sake I sincerely hope not." Seiryō said ruefully. "We should head back to the manor. I've paid my respects to my mother, and humiliated myself for all time in front of you... I think that's enough for one day. You are welcome to stay with us overnight, if you like — otherwise at least remain to eat with us. You must be hungry, after your journey and everything else."

"If it's not a bother, then thank you." Kiyone nodded her head. "I'd appreciate that."

"Then let's go." Seiryō hesitated, then held out his arm to her and with a rueful smile Kiyone accepted it, allowing him to lead her back out into the bright spring sunshine. As they made their way back to the estate, Kiyone stole a sidelong glance at her companion, absorbing the uncharacteristic emotion in his teal eyes and the strained, troubled expression that still haunted his features. There were no signs of his earlier breakdown on his cheeks, and he controlled himself well, yet somehow Kiyone felt that the tears were not far beneath the surface and her friend's composure was such that it would take very little to pierce through the veneer of calm once more.

This realisation unnerved her for some reason, and she frowned.

"Seiryō." She murmured, and her companion started, staring at her.

"Kiyone? Something wrong?"

"No." Kiyone shook her head, looking sheepish as she realised she'd spoken aloud. "I'm just glad I came. That's all. After all, it's what friends are for. And maybe you need more of those, for times like this."

"Perhaps." Seiryō said thoughtfully. "But I'm sure none of them would be able to say such pertinent things. I truly appreciate what you said inside there, Kiyone. And I will give it much thought... perhaps in time it will bring me comfort, also. Right now, it's too soon... but even so..."

He shrugged, offering her a faint smile, and this time Kiyone was relieved to see a faint, echoing flicker of the expression in his gaze.

"But for now, I will be a good host and ensure you're fed." He said

pragmatically. “If you are determined to be here, then I am determined to do that.”

“Fair enough.” Kiyone nodded, returning the smile. “I’m right behind you.”

## Chapter 8

---

### Chapter Eight

Well, so this was it.

Kane leant up against the wall of the train station, glancing at his watch as he ran over in his mind the phone call the previous night. Part of him almost felt guilty in tricking his former friend so blatantly, and yet, when he remembered the files that Ishida and his son had shown him, his resolve hardened.

“Masaki’s mixed up in this somehow. He might be being duped, or controlled, or God knows what.” He decided with a sigh. “And in that case, doing this might protect him, in the long run. If Kenichi’s dad is right and this is all building up to some kind of invasion from this Jurai...”

He shook his head, rubbing his temples as he fought to clear his mind. Overhead, the sky was clear and blue, and in such a bright, normal atmosphere it was hard to imagine that anything could be looming on the horizon.

“But that Tennan man already proved how easily they can walk all over us. Even with the nuclear arms the Earth has, can we even begin to match up to something like that?” He wondered helplessly. “All we can do is try and find out their weaknesses... and somehow, prove to them that this planet isn’t going to roll over and just die.”

“Kyoda!”

At the sound of his friend’s voice, Kane turned, offering a faint smile as he saw Tenchi crossing the foyer towards him, raising his hand in a wave as he did so. He pushed back the doors, stepping into the sunlight with a rueful grin on his face.

“Well, here we are.” He said frankly. “Do we still have a truce?”

“We do.” Kane gathered his resolve, nodding his head. “And I’m glad we can do this. Truth is, a lot of weird things have happened in Osaka this last few months. And it would suck if we let them stop us from being on speaking terms.”

“I agree one hundred percent.” Tenchi nodded.

“You... Ryoko-san isn’t with you, is she?”

“No.” Tenchi shook his head. “She understood that this was between you and I. Besides, she doesn’t want us fighting any more than I do. I think she knows it bothers me, being at odds with people... in any case, she’s not going to be coming on this little trip this morning.”

“Good to know.” Kane sighed, relief in his gaze. “I’m still not totally sure I’m comfortable around her. Yet.”

“That’s all right.” Tenchi spread his hands. “I think she understands that, too.”

Kane nodded slowly, and for a moment the two men walked in silence.

“I’m kinda surprised you’re still in Osaka, actually.” It was Tenchi who broke the silence. “I thought you intended on going to the capital after graduation?”

“Yes, and I still do. But a friend of mine is around these parts and I might be getting a job with his father’s company.” Kane said vaguely. “It’s a good position, and I can’t really turn it down. So for now, I’m staying here — although the chances are that I’ll wind up travelling some, too.”

“Oh. Congratulations.” Tenchi grinned. “That’s the hardest part, isn’t it? Finding something after the exams are done.”

“Tell me about it.” Kane agreed ruefully. “What about you, Masaki-kun? Are you just going back to the shrine in the mountains to be a priest?”

“I... don’t think so.” Tenchi rubbed his chin. “I have... well, I don’t know, yet, for sure. But ever since Ryoko’s been here, she’s been working as a liason between Jurai and the Earth. And I suspect that that’s what I’ll be doing from hereon in. After all, I have more connections with Jurai than most people do these days... that’s my suspicion, anyway.”

“Jurai, huh?” Kane’s heart skipped a beat at the casual mention of the planet he was investigating, and he swallowed hard. “Is that Ryoko-san’s planet, or...?”

“Not really.” Tenchi looked surprised. “I mean, yes and no. She has family there, but I wouldn’t say she was from Jurai, exactly. But I thought you weren’t comfortable with all this alien stuff, Kyoda — you don’t have to humour me. It’s fine — I don’t mind.”

“No... I think the more I know, the less worried about it I’ll be.”

Kane said with a sigh. “To be honest, I don’t understand any of it really. And the club incident... still haunts a lot of people. It just... no matter how much I think about it, it makes no sense. Ryoko-san was there, and it was so confusing... you can understand how I feel, can’t you? We don’t know how dangerous any of these people are. Even if your Ryoko *isn’t* dangerous — that there are a lot of planets we didn’t even know about, and that they have advanced technology — doesn’t it worry you even a little?”

“Not really.” Tenchi shook his head. “I don’t think anyone will invade the Earth while they have a peace agreement with Jurai. I mean, I understand how you feel, but really, there’s no need. I can’t see Azusa-heika or for that matter Ayeka or Sasami letting anything happen to this planet.”

Kane frowned, shooting his companion a sidelong glance, but he made no immediate response. Instead he gestured to a well known local restaurant, and Tenchi grinned, nodding his head.

“Suits me.” He agreed. “Lead the way.”

As they made themselves comfortable in an empty booth, Kane rested his head in his hands, eying his companion thoughtfully.

“You’re really not scared of Jurai, are you?” he said softly. Tenchi looked startled. Then he shook his head.

“There’s no reason to be.” He assured his companion easily. “Believe me. I’ve met enough Juraians to know that they’re not a threat to the Earth. In fact, there are a lot of things we can probably learn from them. Their ecology is so different from ours, but they don’t have the environmental issues we do. We could probably stand to take their advice — after all, their whole planet is alive with trees and flowers and yet they’re one of the most influential powers in the galaxy.”

“You’ve... *been* there?” Taken aback, Kane could only stare, and Tenchi faltered, then laughed, scratching his head awkwardly.

“I’m sorry. You don’t want to talk about aliens, you want to talk about normal stuff.” He said sheepishly. “I’m not trying to freak you out, Kyoda, I promise.”

“No... like I said, I think I need to know.” Kane looked troubled. “Seriously, Masaki. You’ve been to Jurai? With... Ryoko?”

“Sort of.” Tenchi pursed his lips, and Kane had the distinct idea his companion was selecting what information to tell him. “Once or twice. It’s different from this planet, but it’s not dangerous. I like Jurai

very much, to be honest with you.”

Kane bit his lip.

“But it’s like... light years from the Earth, isn’t it?” He reflected. “Weren’t you travel-sick?”

“Travel-sick?” Tenchi looked startled. “The first time, I guess it was a bit oppressive. But no, not really.”

“Do you think space is dangerous, Masaki-kun?”

“Space?” Tenchi looked taken aback. “I guess it can be, just like anything. Why? Kyoda, you seem to have something on your mind — is it still bothering you, that Ryoko came from outside this world? Because I want us to be on speaking terms, but I’m not going to forsake her either. I do love her, you know. That isn’t going to change, so if you can’t accept that...”

Kane did not answer right away, toying absently with his glass as he debated how best to respond. Then he sighed.

“I guess I’m just a little worried for you. That’s all.” He admitted at length. Tenchi’s eyes widened.

“Worried? Why?”

“I... It’s hard to explain.” Kane hazarded. “But you... we’ve been friends, and I still consider that we are. I mean, beyond all of this — we’re buddies, and I miss that. That’s the truth, Masaki. We had a lot of laughs, before all of this alien stuff kicked in and started dividing people into groups.”

“True.” Tenchi frowned. “But I still don’t see...”

“I know you say Ryoko didn’t do anything to hurt anyone at the Osaka club, and I accept that... if you say it’s true, I believe you.” Kane rested his chin on his hands once more. “But I do remember something, Masaki, and it makes me worry that you’re in over your head.”

“Such as?”

“Whatever happened that night, that man who came from the spaceship... he was looking for you, wasn’t he?”

“Man?” Tenchi looked bewildered, then, “Seiryō Tennan?”

“Yes. Him. He knew you by name... and he meant business, didn’t he?”

“He... was confused.” Tenchi said with a sigh. “I see. So this is what



it's about? You think that I'm in danger, because I'm seeing Ryoko... is that it?"

"Partly." Kane admitted. "If you've been to Jurai, I guess it makes sense that some alien guy would know your name. But... Tenchi, listen to me a second, would you? I don't know whether it's true or it isn't, but I heard... a rumour... that Ryoko-san isn't... well, that she was... some kind of intergalactic criminal. And... that she was associated with dangerous people. This Tennan guy came out of nowhere to hunt you down — don't you think you're skating close to the edge, if it gets us caught up in some kind of interplanetary space conflict? A lot of people are still scared of what happened that night, and I'm not ashamed to admit I'm one of them. He blew the club to smithereens, we all saw it. And he was looking for you. If he knows you're here... that this planet is sheltering you... and Ryoko... what does that mean for everyone else?"

Tenchi stared, disbelief flickering in his dark eyes as he absorbed his companion's words. Then he shook his head.

"Kyoda-kun, nothing is going to happen to the Earth." He said softly. "I can see why you'd be worried — in fact, now you've explained it like that, I understand why you've acted the way you have. I guess I get it — Washu did say that you need more time to adjust to the idea of other planets, and that I've had longer than most to get used to that. She was right... especially since right now your only experience of alien life is probably that attack. But really, Kyoda, there's no intergalactic war going on. Jurai is peaceful, really. And Ryoko... Ryoko isn't what you think she is. At least, not any more."

"Not any more?" Kane's eyes widened. "You mean... but she *was*?"

"Ryoko's past is eclectic, and really, not either of our business." Tenchi said vaguely. "She's not a wanted criminal though, if that's your concern. There aren't any space warrants out for her arrest. And as for Seiryo Tennan... I doubt he's even interested in coming back to the Earth. He was confused, like I told you. He's not really like that at all. Actually... I think he's probably a pretty good person to have as an ally, to be honest with you."

Kane swallowed hard, fighting to keep his composure. Slowly he nodded.

"All right." He agreed. "If you say so, I... I'll believe you. It's hard to know what's what from the news and those things — but I'll take it from you, Masaki. If you think that there's no danger, then... then I'm sorry and I... I will try to get my head around your seeing Ryoko-san."

I don't want us to stop being friends because of a chick."

"Agreed." Tenchi looked relieved, and he nodded his head, proffering his hand to shake on the deal. "And I'm glad you feel that way, too."

As Kane accepted the gesture, a movement out of the corner of his eye made him glance up and he frowned, meeting the gaze of a young girl, thick red hair pulled back from her face, her wide green eyes absorbing everything around her. As she caught his eye, she smiled, dimpling. Then she turned, skipping out of the building without a backward glance. Despite himself, Kane was struck by this little girl, for something in her expression had set his nerves on edge.

"Kyoda?" Tenchi murmured. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah... just a kid giving me funny looks. Nothing important." Kane roused himself, nodding. "Sorry. I'm a space cadet today, aren't I?"

"No more than usual." Tenchi bantered, and Kane managed a weak smile.

"We should order." he reflected, pushing the image of the child from his mind as he reached to pick up the menu. "I'm probably just hungry. That's all."

Outside of the restaurant, Washu slipped neatly between the buildings, drawing her hands together as she re-channeled her energy into assuming her adult form once more. As she did so, her eyes narrowed, and she let out a heavy sigh, leaning up against the wall and folding her arms as she tut-tutted under her breath.

"So Ryoko was right." She murmured. "This Kyoda kid... to think that for once my daughter's paranoia would pay off. But... I wonder. I've glossed things in front of Tenchi, but there *is* a lot of tension brewing on the alien front of late. I've noticed it, the few times I've met with officials about this or that science project. They seem to still trust me, so far... and that's good to know. But this desire to up Earth's defence systems... all of a sudden. I wonder what's behind that. It's almost as if... some unspoken directive was at work here. And having overheard Tenchi and his friend talking, I'm beginning to be sure of it. Why else ask so many clumsy questions about Seiryō Tennan and Ryoko's past? Kane Kyoda is hiding something, and Tenchi's probably too naive to work out what it is. Thank God for him Ryoko and I are not so easily fooled."

She glanced at her hands, then shrugged, phasing her body out of

the Osaka side-street and back to her laboratory, re-materialising in front of her main computer unit as she cast it a pensive look.

“Well?” Ryoko’s voice startled her and she turned to see her daughter watching her impatiently. “Is Tenchi okay or are they swinging fists again?”

“They seem perfectly amicable, if that’s all you’re worried about.” Washu said with a casual shrug, dropping down in front of her mainframe as she keyed in a couple of commands. “Where’s Yume?”

“Cooking lunch. What do you mean, if that’s all?” Ryoko’s eyes narrowed. “Something else?”

“Yes.” Washu frowned, turning to offer her daughter a grave look. “You’re right about this Kyoda boy. I thought you were being paranoid, when you said he was trouble for Tenchi, but I’m revising my opinion.”

“So what do we do about it?” Ryoko demanded. “I can’t go around attacking earthlings... not if I want to stay here. And dammit, nor can Tenchi.”

“Right now, nothing. I need to work out if this boy’s sudden desire to talk to Tenchi about aliens and all kinds of other matters has a connection with the sudden increase in security demands for the atmosphere of this planet.” Washu reflected. “I’m starting to be a mite concerned, to be honest. I’ve been trying to tell myself that it’s just paranoia — that I’m letting my past experiences colour my opinion of this planet. But... I have noticed things. Little ones. And now... you know, Kyoda asked Tenchi about your pirate past, and about Seiryō Tennan and why he came asking for Tenchi in Osaka. Those are pretty leading questions.”

“No kidding.” Ryoko’s expression darkened. “What did Tenchi tell him?”

“Nothing, fortunately.” Washu reflected. “He’s not completely stupid, and even if he’s talking to someone he thinks is his friend, he’s not going to want to scare him by elucidating your interesting history. But what bothers me is how he came by that kind of information. He sounded like he knew... a lot more than he was saying. That... what he was asking Tenchi, he already knew some of the answers to. Or thought he did.”

“So he’s acting as some kind of what... spy?” Ryoko bit her lip. “I thought that the Earth’s welcome attitude was getting too good to be true. Do you think they’re going to try and kick me out of here?”

“I don’t know, but I will.” Washu said grimly. “Even if they know who you are, it doesn’t seem that they know too much about me yet. And while I’m still being trusted, I might be able to do some spying of my own. Starting with the Intergalactic Space Consortium — it’s about time I showed my face there, and if something’s afoot, I might find a clue if I nosy about a little in their restricted files. I have access, after all, and it would look less strange for me to investigate than it would you.”

Ryoko grimaced, then nodded her head.

“Fine.” She agreed with a sigh. “I guess so. I guess *I* need to keep my head down and plan my wedding, else people will think I’m looking for trouble. But it sucks, Washu. If this is some group of idiots trying to come between Tenchi and I... just when we’re finally together, and settled...”

She trailed off, and Washu’s expression softened, as she crossed the room, resting a hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“You have my word that I won’t let that happen.” She said sincerely, offering her only child a smile. “I’ve already promised myself that I’m going to make sure you have a happy ending, because I know what it feels like to be denied. So you leave it to me. I’m not quite a fool, and I’m probably better experienced in all of these kinds of things than people like Kane Kyoda. He seemed... an awkward kind of a spy, if that is what he is. And I think he does care about Tenchi’s friendship, so I’m not totally sure what his motives are right at the moment. But I am sure of one thing — he’s not acting on his own, and this lunch meeting wasn’t a coincidental attempt to call a truce. Something darker is at work on this planet... and my next aim is to find out exactly what that something is!”

Morning.

Kiyone opened her eyes, yawning as she stretched her arms over her head. The glittering ceiling of an expensive mansion room hung overhead and for a moment she faltered, unable to work out why she was not aboard Yagami and where on earth she could be. Then, as memory returned to her, she sighed, pulling herself into a sitting position as she reached for a stray blanket, wrapping it around her body as she moved to the window. It had been late by the time they had finished eating, and, with the memory of Seiryō’s tears still fresh in her mind, Kiyone had opted not to hurry away from Jurai, hoping against hope that this was one of the few occasions when Mihoshi would manage to keep her mouth shut.

“I wonder how he is this morning.” She reflected, as she rested her elbows on the sill of the guest room, gazing out across the spacious Tennan estate towards the dip in the land that led down to the family’s mausoleum. “Last night he seemed... a little better, when we parted. Like talking to me... like shedding tears in that place had actually helped make a difference. But I don’t know. It’s wrong, seeing him this way. He’s so strong — strong to the point of arrogance, usually. This Seiryō... is a man I don’t know. I knew he loved his mother, but...”

She sighed, closing her eyes as a face flickered before her own gaze, vivid as if it were only yesterday that they had been parted.

“Kei-nii.” She murmured. “I suppose it’s true that grief can change you. But I... I found my closure, when I solved your case. Seiryō’s still looking for his. I understand what he’s feeling, but... I don’t know how best to help him.”

“Kiyone-san?”

A knock at the door made the Detective start and she turned, seeing Seiryō’s sister standing in the doorway, robe wrapped around her slim body and her thick curly hair bound back from her face. She started in surprise, and Suki smiled, slipping into the room and shutting the door behind her.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s early, but I heard you moving around.” She said softly. “Do you mind — am I disturbing you?”

“No. I’m always up early — It’s fine, Suki, really.” Kiyone was surprised. Suki offered another slight smile, although her aquamarine eyes remained clouded, as she came to join the young officer at the window.

“I wanted to speak to you, before you went back, and before my brother was up.” She said quietly, toying with the tie of her robe as she met Kiyone’s gaze seriously. “I wanted to thank you for coming all this way. I didn’t know until Tokimi told me that you *were* coming... and I wasn’t sure whether it would be a good thing, or not, if you did. But... I think it was. For Seiryō... thank you.”

“Well, I’m not the best person in the world at comforting, but I do know what it feels like to lose someone I loved.” Kiyone eyed her companion keenly. “What about you, Suki-sama? Are you all right?”

“I think so. More than he is.” Suki nodded her head. “Mother suffered so much for so long, you have to understand that. And the other thing is that Okaasama always had her faith in which to find

comfort. Even though he works so closely for Sasami, Seiryō doesn't have that same faith. He believes in what he sees — the reality of Sasami's magic, sure enough. But the spiritual side — the guarding of souls beyond death... Seiryō has always been a practical man. To his mind, Mother is gone. There is nothing more... and that's why it's so hard for him to accept."

She swallowed, composing herself.

"I believe Mother's soul has gone somewhere beautiful. Somewhere there is no pain or suffering." She whispered. "And if I believe that, it's easier to be parted from her. She was so very, very ill. I hope that now she's happy and at peace. I believe she is... she deserved to be."

She tilted her head, sending the Detective a curious look.

"Will you stay here longer?" She asked softly. "Because you're more than welcome to, if you want. My brother finds it hard to confide his feelings, and I know he won't discuss them with me because he knows I'm suffering too. He's always protected me — he wouldn't burden me with this, not now. He'll feel he has to be the strong one, but I think he's having a harder time than I am with the whole concept. And... maybe he can confide in you. You seem... to be good friends. Tokimi certainly thinks so. She was happy when she knew you were coming. So will you stay? At least... a day or two more? Till Mother's memorial?"

"I... don't know." Kiyone faltered. "That depends on Seiryō. Whether he wants me here. And it depends on my work, too. If I'm called back..."

"I understand." Suki inclined her head. "And if that's the case, then of course, you must go. But... even for being here last night, Kiyone-san — thank you."

Kiyone sighed, resting her chin in her hands as she caught sight of the Lord of the Manor in the grounds below.

"He's up too." She murmured. "I wonder how much sleep he got."

Suki frowned, shaking her head.

"He can be too strong." She murmured. "He's going to the palace — he's dressed as Sasami's advisor, and it's almost time for Council session. Excuse me, Kiyone-san... I have to stop him. Sasami's told him to take time away, and he can't hide his grief in his work. It's not healthy... I just wish he'd listen to me."

"Do you want me to try?" Kiyone asked, and Suki faltered, eying

her companion uncertainly. Kiyone shrugged.

“You said he listens to me.” She said ironically. “It would be a good test, wouldn’t it? Besides, better he’s mad at me than at you, surely? I can always take Yagami and leave Jurai, after all.”

Suki hesitated. Then, slowly, she nodded her head.

“Thank you.” She murmured. “You’re right.”

Kiyone flashed her a smile, discarding the blanket as she pulled on her uniform over the top of her nightclothes.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make him listen to me.” She said frankly. “I promise, I’ll bring him back home. You have enough to worry about without him causing you more problems.”

With that she was gone, down the stairs and through the centre of the busy house, ignoring the confused looks of the various house staff as they began their morning routines. Pushing open the heavy door of the estate, she hurried across the grass in the direction she had seen the nobleman go, a faint flicker of annoyance in her heart as she realised how stubborn he was being.

“Men.” She muttered. “Juraian men most of all! Why can’t he be like any ordinary person, and just listen when people give him advice! If Sasami doesn’t want him at court, why the hell should he be going there? After yesterday, he’s in no fit state!”

Almost as soon as this thought had crossed her mind, she caught sight of her target and her gaze narrowed as she judged whether or not she could reach him before he entered the palace grounds without causing a scene. Darting off the main path, she cut across the corner through a swathe of perfectly aligned Juraian Camelia trees, re-emerging onto the trackway just as the nobleman reached her. Without even stopping to think, she reached out a hand, grabbing him firmly by the arm and yanking him into the undergrowth.

“What the hell?” Seiryō, startled out of his reverie stumbled, almost falling headlong as he found himself pulled into the trees. “Kiyone? What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?”

“No, you have, and you’re worrying Suki.” Kiyone said frankly, putting her hands on her hips as she glared at him. “Listen, you idiot. We both know you’re not fit enough to do any kind of work, so stop pretending you are. Don’t you know that it’s more stress for your sister and Tokimi if you try and pretend everything is all right? They both know you well enough to know that it isn’t... and do you really think you’re up to facing all those rude, pushy nobles that infest Jurai’s

court, anyway?"

"Kiyone, this is none of your business. I am a peer of Jurai and a vassal of Lady Sasami -the world doesn't stop spinning just because one woman dies." Seiryō said quietly, and Kiyone's brows knitted together.

"Not good enough." She said firmly. "I didn't come here so that you could behave like an arrogant idiot. I told you once that you didn't have to play it tough or pretend you could handle everything. And forget what they might think of you. You know you don't care two hoots for your fellow peers, so don't even give them another thought."

Seiryō stared at her for a moment, then he shook himself free of her grip.

"You of all people should understand." He said quietly, and Kiyone was aware of the flicker of anguish and determination in his teal gaze. "Kiyone, you of all people should know why I have to go on as normal. Sitting around — dwelling, it's only going to drive me crazy. You told me that when your brother died, you were the one who solved his murder. You laid your ghosts to rest because you went back to work and you put it in its right place. At least let me do the same."

"It's true, I did." Kiyone nodded her head. "And it did help, I don't deny it. But it put space between my family and I... at least, on my part. I never totally did accept that Kei-nii wouldn't be at home, if I went there to visit. And because that's still there, somewhat, I don't go home. Because he is there, but he's buried. He's not the Keitaro I remember. So yes, I went back to work. I hid myself in the Galaxy Police and I helped to solve my brother's murder. But if you think it solved everything, you're wrong. And you can't run away from your family. They're not *like* mine. Tokimi and Suki love you and your acting like this is only going to make them worry more."

"Did you come here to help me, or to tell me off?" There was an edge to Seiryō's tones, and Kiyone's brows knitted together.

"Both, if necessary." She said quietly, gently taking him by the arm and leading him back towards the house. "Listen to me, all right, else there's really no point in me being here at all. I know what I'm talking about. And you aren't as in command of your emotions as you usually are. If you go in there... who knows what might happen? What people might say — how you might react? You're shouting at me and I've not even done anything yet. Do you want to lose your temper with the Emperor?"

Seiryō opened his mouth to retort, then faltered.



“No.” He admitted. “But I hate feeling helpless. I hate... doing nothing.”

His voice caught slightly, and he gritted his teeth, shaking his head.

“I should never have burdened you by bringing you here, should I?” He said softly. “I’m sorry, Kiyone. I’m using you as a verbal punch bag, but that’s not why I called you in the first place.”

“No. You called me because you needed a friend.” Kiyone said evenly. “And you’re pretty desperate, because I’m the best you can manage. But right now, I don’t care if you get mad at me. We’re going back to the Tennan estate. Suki was worried, when she realised what you were about this morning. Do you want to pile more stress onto her head? Don’t you think she misses your mother too?”

Seiryō looked stricken, and Kiyone knew her words had hit home.

“Exactly.” She said quietly. “So come on. And stop being an ape.”

Seiryō sighed, but gave up his resistance, and for a while they walked in silence back towards the Tennan estate.

“I wished to speak to Lady Sasami about Mother’s memorial, too.” It was Seiryō who broke the calm, as they reached the main gates.

“Well, I can ask her to come see you.” Kiyone said frankly. “I was going to try and see Sasami and Ayeka before I went back to Headquarters, anyway. So I’ll be your errand girl. In the circumstances, no one will expect you to show your face at court, anyway. And I don’t mind.”

“You really are determined to keep me under lock and key, aren’t you?” Seiryō eyed her keenly. “If you’re afraid I may publically have another moment of weakness like I did yesterday, Kiyone, your fears are groundless.”

“I don’t mind if you cry or if you don’t.” Kiyone said evenly. “Or where you do it, if it helps you come to terms with this. I told you yesterday that it didn’t make you any less of a man, to shed tears for someone you loved. But I *do* worry that you might jump into a fight with someone — probably Takeru-sama — and get yourself into some kind of trouble. And that is the last thing poor Suki needs, with everything else on her mind. If you want to protect her, and you don’t want her to worry about you, then you need to stop acting before you think. Take a few days and don’t run away from it... cowards run away, after all. Are you that?”

“Are you?”

“Sometimes I wonder.” Kiyone admitted. “But that’s beside the point.”

She gave him a little push.

“Here. This is where *you* belong.” She added. “I’ll change properly, and then I’ll go see Sasami for you. You go think about what I’ve said, all right?”

“You can be very bossy, sometimes.”

“Well, it matches up with your idiocy.” Was Kiyone’s smart rejoinder, and despite himself, a faint smile touched Seiryo’s lips.

“Perhaps it does.” he owned. “Very well, Detective. I bow to your better opinion.”

He inclined his head towards her, as if acknowledging her words, then he turned on his heel, heading back towards the house. Kiyone frowned, watching him go.

“Idiot.” She muttered. “But maybe he isn’t so very different from me, after all. Kei-nii... I suppose I did run away, didn’t I? Maybe I was a coward. I don’t know. It brought me closure, and that was all I cared about at the time. Still, at least he didn’t fight me too hard. I don’t know that I’d have been able to force him back here, if he hadn’t been willing to go. He really is a stubborn ass at times.”

She pursed her lips, then shrugged her shoulders, heading back inside as she made her way up to the elegant chamber that had become hers the previous evening as she sought to properly change her clothes.

“I’ll tell Sasami that he’s really not up to doing anything official for a week or two at the very least.” She decided as she brushed her hair, tying it back loosely as she straightened her uniform. “There. I don’t know if I’ll be able to stay on Jurai any longer than today — I need to call in with Mihoshi later and find out if anyone’s bothered about my absence. For now, though, I better keep my word. If I don’t, he’ll just be off across the landscape all over again.”

It was not a long walk to the Tenju palace, and as she reached the entrance, she produced her identification, flashing the soldier on duty a smile as she explained the reason for her presence.

“It’s not exactly an official visit.” She concluded. “But if Lady Sasami is not otherwise engaged, I’d appreciate a moment of her time.”

“Kiyone-san!” Before either of the officials could react, a third

soldier pushed between them, bowing his head towards her as he offered her a smile. “What brings you to Jurai?”

“Kamidake.” Kiyone grinned back. “I’ve come to see Sasami, sort of. In a round about way. Is it possible — can I?”

“Of course. I know she’ll want to see you.” Kamidake nodded his head. “She’s been at Tsunami’s shrine, but I think she’s out by the stream now — she has nothing pressing on her schedule... come with me, and I’ll take you there.”

“Thanks.” Kiyone nodded, sliding her identification back into her pocket. “That would make life simpler. I’m glad she’s not busy — I know that since she became Tsunami’s representative on a public scale, she’s had a lot of things to think about.”

“Well, at the moment, there’s not a lot she can do.” Kamidake admitted. “You must be aware... that Sasami’s advisor is not with us at present.”

“That’s partly why I’m here.” Kiyone’s expression became grave, and she nodded. “Although he very nearly was here, this morning. I had to forcibly drag him back to the Tennan estate.”

“Pardon me?” Kamidake looked bewildered, and Kiyone eyed him ruefully.

“Seiryō was the one who called me to Jurai.” She admitted. “When I heard about his mother, I came to see if I could do anything to help. In honesty, he seemed at the end of his tether, when we spoke. And I would say... that that would still be a pretty good assessment of his current mental state. Although he seems a little better than he did when I arrived yesterday... I think it’s hit him hard.”

“Indeed.” Kamidake’s expression cleared, and he nodded. “Lord Tennan is a very strong man, and he takes his duties to Princess Sasami extremely seriously. However, in the circumstances... no one expects him to attend court. I’m sure at the moment there are far more pressing things on his mind than the matters of state or faith.”

“Understatement.” Kiyone said frankly. “So I’ve come bearing a message for the Princess... because it was the only way to make sure he didn’t come and run amok at the palace. His temper’s on a short fuse... I didn’t want to risk conflict. I know what Seiryō’s like, when he’s angry — he gets sarcastic and I didn’t want him to decide to choose today to re-ignite his feud with Lord Takeru.”

“I believe your thinking to be wise.” Kamidake spoke ruefully. “It is true that Takeru-sama and Seiryō-sama have buried most of their

animosity when in public... however, in private circles..."

He shrugged.

"But this is no business of mine." He reflected. "Actually, when I saw you, I wondered if you were here on another errand."

"Another errand?" Kiyone looked startled, and the Knight nodded his head.

"Mm. Regarding the planet known as Earth, and its relations with the Galaxy Police."

"The... Earth?" Kiyone's eyes narrowed. "What about it?"

"Then you are not aware." Kamidake looked pensive. "And I am unsure if it is my place to tell you. Lord Tennan would probably say yes, but he is not here to consult — in fact, with the situation as it is, he knows nothing of it. But..."

"Kamidake, if this involves the Police, I should know." Kiyone said frankly. "Tell me, and don't worry about protocol. If it's sensitive information, I won't reveal where it came from. But if it's important, I should know."

"Very well." Kamidake frowned. "There have been reports of late that... well. The Galaxy Police has always had close ties with Jurai. This is true, isn't it?"

"Yes. Too close." Kiyone agreed. "Sometimes, at least."

"Indeed." Kamidake nodded his head. "And since the Emperor extended his hand of friendship to the Earth, more and more of their kind have travelled through space to Jurai... everyone has high hopes of this being a secure alliance."

"But..?" Kiyone pressed. "Something involving the Police is interfering with this...?"

"Well." Kamidake sighed. "At the start of the week, envoys arrived here from the Galaxy Police Elite. They spoke with my Emperor for some time, and Azaka and I were fortunate enough to be present for most of the conversation. They raised serious concerns... about a security leak from their central command. In short, that there are spies within the Galaxy Police who are not in conjunction with Jurai."

"Spies against Jurai?" Kiyone looked bewildered. "From the Earth? What the hell do they think they're doing? If they create trouble for Azusa-sama and this world...?"

"Yes, and openly, relations between the planets remain peaceful."

Kamidake nodded. “But... someone was arrested here yesterday morning, on suspicion of providing illicit information to people outside of Jurai’s borders. Normally, these kinds of things are dealt with swiftly and simply. However, in this particular case, the situation seems a little bit more obscure. In truth, Kiyone-san, I really am the wrong one to be bearing this news. However, since you are clearly associating yourself with Lord Tennan, you should be aware of what is going on.”

“With *Seiryō*?” Kiyone looked lost. “You’re jumping around all over the place — this connects to *Seiryō*?”

“The man arrested yesterday had in his possession reports relating to the incident with Kihaku and the hearing of Lord Tennan.” Kamidake said gravely. “And the envoys from the Elite seem to believe that he has been the focus of attention at Headquarters, too. They, being former allies and comrades of Lord Tennan’s, are concerned about the situation. But also because they realise that good relations with Jurai are precious...”

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“With our involvement with Lady Sasami, it is impossible for Azaka and I to stay out of matters as much as we should.” He admitted. “We are afraid — both the Emperor and ourselves — that she has also come in for an amount of scrutiny, maybe because of her links with Lord Tennan, or maybe because of her divine connection to Jurai’s holy Goddess. It seems clear though that all these incidents are connected. That the planet known as Earth are, all of a sudden, fiercely interested in both Lord *Seiryō* Tennan and the Princess Sasami.”

“How weird.” Kiyone’s brows knitted together. “What could a planet like the Earth do to anyone?”

“That is the material question.” Kamidake admitted. “My instinct would be very little. However... that there has been some breach of security seems beyond doubt. Furthermore, if they have data relating to *Seiryō*-sama’s hearing, they will know that you testified. And you may yourself become an object of scrutiny — which is why I thought that the reason you had come.”

“Because I gave evidence against *Seiryō*...” Kiyone bit her lip. “But that’s all in the past, now. He was possessed. He’s nothing like the man I thought he was then... are you saying someone might see me as a potential ally, because I aligned myself against him then?”

“It is possible, yes.” Kamidake said with a sigh. “You have to

remember that my Emperor, considering the delicacy of the case, suppressed a lot of the details from the Galaxy Police even after Lord Tennan decided to tender his resignation for the Elite. Your Commander may know more now than he did before — such has been my impression from Lord Tennan's own comments — but as a whole, the matter has been hushed up quite considerably. But it is paperwork that relates to a breach of not only Juraian trust but Galaxy Police trust. A matter involving an assault on a fellow officer attempting to do her duty.”

“Me.” Kiyone sighed. “Even though I was actually spying for Washu at the time — which wasn't really me doing my duty at all, when it comes down to it.”

“But you *were* a victim in this case, which may suit whatever body is investigating the event.” Kamidake said evenly. “And because of this, I think... Seiryō-sama would say you should know, if he were here to give such advice.”

“And he knows nothing of this?”

“Nothing.” Kamidake confirmed. “With his personal situation, it was thought better. Takeru-sama even gave directives to that effect — that no one was to bother Seiryō-sama until he was ready to return to the court and take up his responsibilities. He effectively swore us to secrecy, so I may have been remiss in revealing this to you. However...”

“No. It's all right. I can be discreet.” Kiyone's eyes narrowed as she digested his words. “But it makes no sense. The Elite envoys have left?”

“Yes.” Kamidake agreed. “They left before the Juraian spy was apprehended.”

“And him?”

“He has been confined awaiting trial, but it would seem that he was paid a good deal of money by someone acting as a middle-man between the Earth and Jurai.” Kamidake shrugged. “That is all I know. His name — this I cannot give you. I do not know what it is.”

“Well, you've given me enough to think about.” Kiyone murmured. “All right, Kamidake. Thank you for taking the gamble and telling me. I'll keep it in mind when I go back — I'll be on my guard for anyone who might be looking to sway me to their cause. Who knows... I might learn something.”

She eyed him pensively.

“Sasami — does she know about this?”

“Yes.” Kamidake agreed. “Because her name has been brought into the equation. But I do not fear for the Princess’s safety. Of all people, she can defend herself better than even Azaka and I can defend her these days. But... there is another matter which causes us all concern. You are aware... that our own communications with the Earth — it seems likely that Lord Tenchi and Lady Ryoko will be cementing their alliance in the not so distant future? In that event, Sasami-sama and Ayeka-sama at the very least would seek to travel to the Earth — probably Lord Takeru as well, and perhaps even Lord Tennan, if he is enough recovered. If the Earth is becoming a volatile place for Juraian interest, can you imagine what the consequences could be? If something threatened the Princesses, Azusa-sama may not take it lightly.”

“And Earth might be attacked.” Kiyone said thoughtfully. “Yes. I see. Though I can’t understand what benefit this would have for anyone on the Earth.”

“Me either. But as I said, that’s all I know.”

As they rounded the corner, they reached their destination, and as Kiyone gazed across towards the stream, a young girl got to her feet with an exclamation as she ran across to hug her visitor.

“Kiyone!”

“Sasami-chan.” Kiyone grinned, returning the hug warmly. “For a Goddess, you sure have a lot of mud on your gown.”

“I know, but I can do as I please this morning... and I’m making the most of it.” Sasami admitted. “Kiyone, why are you here? Is it because... has Kamidake told you? About the Galaxy Police?”

“He has, but don’t worry. I can be discreet.” Kiyone assured her. “And that’s not why I’m here. Actually, it’s a total other reason. I came to see Seiryō.”

“Seiryō?” Sasami blinked, then, “You came to see him especially?”

“Yes.” Kiyone agreed. “Because he needed a friend. I came yesterday, and I don’t know if I’m staying beyond today, yet. But he seemed so out of it when he called me, I had to come make sure he was all right.”

“He really isn’t.” Sasami looked troubled. “Suki’s worried about him. She says he bottles it up inside of him and it’s enough to make her scream... he won’t talk about it, or cry, or do any of the normal

things people do when someone dies. All he's done is take his sword and carved up an old hut... he's frustrating both of us."

"He was coming to the palace this morning, but I stopped him." Kiyone admitted, as the young princess led her back towards the water's edge, sinking down on the grass and making herself comfortable. "I hoped that I'd get a chance to come visit you and Ayeka while I was here, too, so I told him I'd bring his message to you."

"Well, I'm glad for the thought." Sasami dimpled. "And to see you — although you probably won't see Ayeka. She's been busy a lot lately, and... not so well, if I'm honest. She shouldn't be working so hard... it sort of worries me."

"She's all right, isn't she?" Kiyone looked anxious, and Sasami nodded her head slowly.

"I think so." She agreed. "It's not like that. I mean... it's hard to explain. But I don't think she'll be able to spare time like I can. It's frustrating, being so kept out of things with Seiryō not here — they take me more seriously at court when he's with me. That's why I don't know as much as I should about this spy thing... because noone will talk to thirteen year old Princesses if there's not an adult to play babysitter."

Her crimson eyes glittered with frustration, and Kiyone laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"You shouldn't be in such a hurry to grow up, you know."

"It's not that." Sasami sighed. "I just... I want to help Ayeka. And you, and Seiryō, too. I want to be involved in this, and it's a pain. But I won't have Seiryō back before he's ready — it's just sort of annoying that it's only okay to address things to Lady Tsunami if it's done through Lord Tennen. I didn't realise how much he gets me listened to — right now I've been relegated back to being Child Princess and it stinks."

"Well, I think that Seiryō might be glad to have an unofficial visit from that child princess." Kiyone reflected, faint amusement in her eyes at her companion's rebellious attitude. "He wants to speak to you about his mother's memorial — if you don't mind, I think it would be a better conversation had in the privacy of the Tennen estate. I don't think he *should* be here, when everyone is going to stare at him. Right now he's on edge enough to take his blade to anyone at a moment's notice."



“Then I will go there this afternoon. I meant to, anyhow.” Sasami nodded, her crimson eyes grave. “I feel so sorry for him, Kiyone. First his father, then his mother.”

“I think he’s taken this one a lot harder than he took his father’s death.” Kiyone leant back on her hands, gazing up at the clear blue sky. “I’ve never seen him like this, and it worries me, to be honest. Even when he was half crazed and trying to kill me, I swear... he wasn’t as strange as he is right now.”

“Men are so funny when it comes to things like crying, and stuff like that.” Sasami said pensively. “Suki says he just won’t do it, but I’m sure he’d feel better if he did.”

“Men are an enigma all of their own.” Kiyone said ruefully. “I’ve told him the same thing.”

“I wish it hadn’t all happened now.” Sasami admitted. “With all this spy business going on. I don’t know why they’re so interested in him, Kiyone... it bothers me. Seiryō’s been through a lot of things in the past year and a half... he left the Galaxy Police even though he didn’t want to, because of Tokimi’s magic. Now his mother’s passed away, and I know how close they were. It seems unfair that this is another thing on his head. I’m glad you came to see him. It was kind of you... and I’m glad you’re friends now, I really am. He’s never been an evil man, and I’m glad you could forgive him. I just hope this isn’t going to turn into another bad time for him.”

“Well, if something’s going on at the Galaxy Police, now I’m aware of it, I’ll see what I can find out.” Kiyone decided. “It’s really someone on the Earth who’s behind all of this?”

“Well, that’s not totally for sure, but it looks that way.” Sasami toyed with a stray blade of grass. “Uncle thinks that it’s a knee-jerk reaction to Jurai’s involvement... that the people are afraid of us. It’s happened before, and Jurai have a reputation for invasion and stuff. But the thing is, the Earth couldn’t fight Jurai. So I don’t know why they’d want to make Uncle angry. And besides, Tenchi and Ryoko and Washu and Ryo Ohki are there... so Uncle wouldn’t attack the Earth anyway.”

“But the people on the Earth don’t know Azusa-sama’s mind like you do, I suppose.” Kiyone sighed. “Fear does make people do stupid things. And the trouble is, Earth might be weak. But if the Police are involved, somehow... we’re talking about a multi-national body of people, from all over the galaxy. They might find other allies with grievances against Jurai.”

“I hadn’t thought of that!” Sasami’s eyes widened with alarm, and Kiyone frowned.

“I know. I’m sorry. But as a Detective, my brain automatically tends to think that way.” She said sadly. She hesitated, then cast her young companion a glance.

“Of course, it doesn’t benefit my friends on Jurai or my friends on the Earth, if the Galaxy Police becomes a political battle ground.” She reflected. “If I find anything out, do you want me to report it back to you, here?”

“Spy for Jurai?” Kamidake looked doubtful. “Wouldn’t that be... risky?”

“Possibly.” Kiyone agreed. “But if I am a target for these people — if they do think I’m an enemy of Seiryō’s, I might well find out more than I bargain for anyway. And you did say that Ryoko and Tenchi’s wedding was on the horizon, Kamidake. If there is something, it should be resolved before Ayeka or Sasami travel to the Earth — right?”

“Ayeka and I *will* go, no matter what.” Sasami said frankly. “But you’re right. Bad stuff could happen, and it could make it tricky for Uncle.”

“So it’s decided, then.” Kiyone shrugged. “I’ll find out what I can, and I’ll report to you, Sasami, on whatever I do. After all, if Seiryō’s in the state he is, he doesn’t need to know he’s been the target of a spy.”

“We do miss his counsel.” Kamidake said gravely. “I’m sure he would not want you to put yourself in danger on his behalf.”

“Well, he won’t need to know about it, and I’m sure it’s more than just Seiryō’s behalf.” Kiyone said pragmatically. “When I go back, I’ll see what’s what. Don’t worry, I’ll be careful. I’ve learnt a lot more about discretion and elite tactics in the past year, thanks to his help... its time I put them to some use!”

## Chapter 9

---

### Chapter Nine

“So, what have you got to tell me, Kane-kun?”

As Kane pushed open the door of Ishida’s office, he cast the entrepreneur a hesitant glance, before making his way over to the desk. His friend’s father was seated, a look of nonchalance on his face, but Kane could see beyond the façade and he realised with a jolt that influential as this man was in his own circles, this business was putting him under a fair amount of pressure also.

He sighed, then came to sit down opposite the older man.

“Not a whole lot, I don’t think.” He admitted. “I mean, I have patched up with Masaki. It was easy, actually, but then I shouldn’t have been surprised. Despite our fight at the graduation party, Masaki’s one of the most peaceable people I know. He was only too happy to forgive and forget once I’d offered him the opportunity.”

“And...?” Ishida pressed, resting his chin in his hands as he leant forward expectantly. “Did you manage to discover the boy’s connections to Jurai, then? Why it was Seiryō Tennan came looking for him and what his involvement in all of these things is?”

“He’s Ryoko’s boyfriend.” Kane shrugged helplessly. “That’s all I have, but I think it’s all there is. Ishida-san, Tenchi’s the most average kind of guy you’ll ever meet, I swear. He always has been. He’s laid back and he’s smart but he’s nothing unusual. He trips over steps and he’s late for classes as much as any of us ever were. It’s a mystery to me why any alien would be interested in him, except of course for his relationship with the pirate woman.”

“Ah yes. The pirate Ryoko.” Ishida rubbed his chin pensively. “And I suppose her track record is enough to attract anyone’s attention. The thing is, though, my sources are clear — and you’ve said it yourself. Tennan came looking for Tenchi Masaki when he paid his visit to the Osaka nightclub. Not Ryoko Hakubi, but Tenchi Masaki. If he’s as you say — why would that be?”

“I’ve been thinking about that too.” Kane admitted. “He did tell me he’d been to Jurai, and that he was acquainted with the Princesses Sasami and Ayeka. Didn’t you say that Sasami was the one they revered like some kind of God? My best guess is that while he was

there he might've stumbled into something and he might have taken away with him information he shouldn't have done. Knowing Masaki, he probably doesn't even realise it himself. He's that slow on the uptake, I doubt he'd know it if it bit him. But it's the only thing that makes any sense. That when he visited Jurai — with that girl of his, no doubt — he found out something that people on Jurai don't want people on the Earth to know about."

Ishida's eyes narrowed, and slowly he nodded his head.

"Possibly you're right." He acknowledged. "It's for sure now that Seiryō Tennen is indeed an influential member of Jurai's Council and also a key representative of the Princess Sasami, the one they all revere as a deity of some nature or other. Masaki may be an innocent in all of this — you know him better than I, after all. But he might still be useful to us. Can you maintain your surveillance of him without arousing the girl's suspicions? If you can, it'd be a bonus."

"I can try." Kane admitted unwillingly. "To tell you the truth, I feel a bit guilty doing it, though. I mean, Masaki and I were friends before Ryoko came into the picture. I feel like I'm screwing him over big time, doing this behind his back."

"And what about him?" Ishida's eyebrow arched at this. "Isn't he potentially endangering everyone on the Earth by housing and protecting someone with impressive space criminal credentials?"

"Yes... I suppose he is." Kane sighed. "But even so..."

"Do you think he's ignorant of that, then? That he doesn't know what his girlfriend did before she settled on Planet Earth as her next resting place?"

"I..." Kane frowned, remembering the conversation and the way Tenchi had answered his questions. "I think he might have some idea, to be honest. It did sound like he knew... something about it. But he didn't want to discuss it and I didn't want to push him too far and make him suspicious of my motives. But... yes, I think... he knows... something."

"Then he's knowingly putting the Earth at risk, surely." Ishida pointed out. "Or have you forgotten the Space Pirate Haki and the files I showed you the first time you entered my office? Kane-kun, this isn't a game. Masaki has dug himself a deep, deep hole... we have to do what's necessary to protect this planet and its people — do you realise that? Masaki is one man — and one man who himself sounds like he needs rescuing. Are you going to let yourself be distracted from the key objective so easily? Is this man really such an important friend

to you that you now want to take his side?”

Kane hesitated for a moment, then shook his head.

“I don’t trust that woman and I don’t like Masaki’s seeing her.” He reflected. “So no. I’m not distracted. You’re right — he should know better. And besides, if we’re successful... maybe he’ll come round, anyway. If she put a spell on him — and she might’ve — we need to break it. After all, who knows how many gullible Earth people have been seduced by aliens pretending to be pretty and harmless space wanderers?”

“That’s more like it.” Ishida smiled, and Kane was sure he saw relief on the older man’s face. “In which case, Kane-kun, there’s someone I’d like to introduce to you.”

He pressed a button on his desk panel, and the door of the office beyond slid back, revealing a tall man dressed in smart blue uniform. As he stepped forwards, the glint of gold letters on his breast made Kane’s eyes widen as he realised where he had seen the attire before.

“Galaxy Police.” He murmured, and at the words, the stranger nodded, bowing his head towards the young graduate with a slight smile.

“You’re astute. I like that.” He said, his tones soft and even, and tinged with the faintest hint of a foreign accent. “You must be Kane Kyoda. Am I correct?”

“Yes sir.” Kane’s gaze flitted to Ishida, the back to the stranger. “But I... I don’t understand...”

“This is Junichi Nakabito, Kane.” Ishida explained briefly, gesturing in the officer’s direction. “He’s a member of the Galaxy Police Elite and a key contact of ours in helping to ensure that the Earth not only gains proper intergalactic status but also to prevent any harm from coming to it in the days and weeks ahead.”

“I... I see.” Kane eyed the stranger doubtfully, and Nakabito offered him a warm grin, holding out his hand in a gesture of friendship.

“You’re unsure about me because I wear the same colours as Seiryo Tennan did, the day he set fire to the club in this town.” He said frankly. “I understand your concerns and your hesitations — it does you credit that you feel that way, in fact. But you can put your mind at rest. I’m not Juraian — in fact, I’ve no connections at all with that planet. For far too long they’ve put themselves on pedestals and ruled on high across the universe... I have no time for that kind of attitude, and if it’s in my power to do so, I’d like to think that I can offer some

protection to the Earth. At the very least, with your help and cooperation, I'm hopeful that we might put a dent in their illustrious reputation — beginning with the Tennan case and working onwards."

"Nakabito-san's father was born on the Earth, like you or I, Kane." Ishida explained with a rueful smile. "So his ties of loyalty are far more here than they are anywhere else. You can have faith in his word — so far he has been very helpful in providing us with the information we need to prepare ourselves for attack."

"I see." Kane relaxed, taking in Nakabito's appearance properly for the first time. He did, he admitted, look like any other Earthling, with his thick tail of black hair pulled back from his face and vivid blue eyes that seemed to reflect both warmth and intelligence. He was perhaps around thirty years old — and despite his Galaxy Police uniform, Kane felt that he was a man they could indeed trust.

At the scrutiny, Nakabito laughed, taking the young man's hand and shaking it.

"There. Now we know one another properly." He said lightly. "And hopefully we can help one another, too."

"Kane has been spending some time with Tenchi Masaki on our behalf — the young man who shelters the Space Pirate Ryoko." Ishida explained, as the young officer took a seat, leaning back in his chair as he surveyed his companions pensively. "He believes that Jurai's interest in the boy is simply that he's been to their planet and learnt something that he should not have learnt during his time there... although of late, there has been no action on that front."

"Masaki is some kind of liason between Earth and Jurai now, or he thinks he will become one, now that we've graduated." Kane reflected thoughtfully. "That's the title under which Ryoko stays here, isn't it? Maybe they have got to him, after all. Paid him something... although I find it hard to believe Masaki could keep that a secret. He just isn't the kind of guy..."

He trailed off with a sigh, shaking his head.

"If I wanted to pick someone to be my man on the Earth, it wouldn't be Tenchi Masaki." He admitted. "He's too... well... nice."

Nakabito chuckled.

"Though isn't it always the quiet ones?" He asked lightly. "My own sources about the Masaki boy are as tight-lipped as yours, I'm afraid. I know only that he comes from the mountains here on Earth, near a town called Kurashiki — that his family own some kind of religious

shrine there and that his father is a well-thought of architect in construction and design circles. All the things I've been able to look at regarding his family have checked out... they seem to be a nice, normal, if alien-friendly family, by all accounts. Certainly the Earth's records show nothing untoward that would indicate why he's taken the stance he has. That's what's so confusing. And there *are* other records within the Galaxy Police Elite Database, but they've been sealed and even *I* can't access them. Anything relating to the name Masaki is top secret information, and only the Commander or a really high level encryption expert would be able to get access to them."

He pursed his lips.

"Of course, I'm qualified in encryption as much as any other Agent, but this is no ordinary set of ciphers." He added. "And I'm sure that that's no accident. Just like I'm sure that the Galaxy Police's most decorated agent in the field of decoding was Seiryō Tennan... a man of Jurai."

"That man again." Ishida murmured. "Does everything, then, connect back to him?"

"In one way or another, it would seem it does." Nakabito agreed evenly. "But even that situation has been firmly hushed up. I've had some luck uncovering a little information on the events surrounding his resignation from the Galaxy Police. The incident in Osaka seems to have been a part of it yet he faced no formal charges and continues to be a high-ranking member of Juraian government. Only the Emperor, his brother and security chief Haru, his nieces Ayeka and Sasami and Ayeka's husband Takeru rank above Seiryō Tennan on Jurai these days... which, considering the situation... is more than a little concerning."

"When Tennan came to the Earth he came dressed like you are, Nakabito-san... and he had others with him dressed in similar clothing." Kane added. "But Ishida-san said that that *wasn't* an official Galaxy Police action. *Is* that why you're here, then? To investigate what happened in Osaka that night?"

"Yes." Nakabito admitted. "As you said, it was definitely *not* an official Galaxy Police raid. And if you were present, your testimony will be invaluable, since all of the officers apparently involved conveniently have no memory of the event having even taken place."

"Paid off?" Ishida asked softly. Nakabito spread his hands.

"I've found nothing to prove that either way." He said gravely. "But then, if it is Jurai involved, they're very good at covering their tracks

and coming out on top.”

He sighed, drumming his fingers absently on the arm of his chair.

“The Earth has been a silent planet for far too long, putting up with the misdemeanours of other life forms without having a voice to complain about it.” He reflected. “Well, now you have a voice and I’m going to do what I can to ensure you keep it. You should not be afraid to speak out — not even against a power that seem to want to smother you. Jurai are a very, very dangerous Empire, both as friend or as foe. Their power base is far too wide-ranging. In recent months they’ve even formed an alliance with Airai — a planet with which they have been in bitter conflict for generations. Coupled with their existing treaties with Seniwa, it means that they now have the most influential hold over the entire universe that they have ever had.”

“Airai... Seniwa?” Kane looked blank, and Nakabito smiled.

“Airai are a planet notorious for practicing dark magic... an art similar to what on the Earth is called ‘voodoo’.” He responded. “They’ve been an uncertain force for generations — and they and Jurai have been bitter enemies up until recently. The current Mage seems to have formed bonds with Jurai’s Lady Sasami — I hate to draw the parallel, but the phrase ‘a coven of witches’ springs to mind. Sasami — or Tsunami-kami-sama as she’s also known — is a pretty powerful witch in her own right, after all.”

“A witch?” Kane stared, and Nakabito shrugged.

“*They* call her a Goddess.” He responded. “But I’d call anyone who had the kind of life or death power she’s credited with a witch, no matter how innocent and young she might seem. Jurai’s magic is as legendary a curse as Airai’s, in some circles. Not to mention the fact this Tsunami is now Seiryō’s direct mentor. Yes, Kane... I believe I do mean ‘witch’.”

“And this Seniwa is just as much of a problem?”

“Seniwa are not magical, but they are highly developed and skilled and they have several dependant planets, as Jurai does.” Nakabito responded. “They are influential, if more reasonable than the other two... however they have been Jurai’s allies for a long time and one will not act against the other for fear of destroying their lucrative trade agreements and tax concessions. Therefore even though Seniwa is not a threat, they are not a viable ally, either. If Jurai was to act against the Earth, Seniwa would stand by and let them. Such is the nature of their political alliance.”



He shrugged.

“Many, many smaller planets are as worried as you are that Jurai’s current dominance will mean covert invasion and domination for them, too.” He concluded. “And it has been the case often in the past. Most of these don’t have the kind of force where they can act — which is where we come in. As Galaxy Police, we’re meant to uphold and defend the weak and the innocent, but in reality we’ve always been too firmly connected to Jurai’s will. However I think that that must change... if any planet is to remain truly free to live its own way. And if we could make an example of Agent Tennan — expose the damage he’s done on behalf of his home-world — there must be a way to break that stranglehold and be able to act once and for all. Bringing Jurai into line for their many misdeeds has long been an aim of mine since I joined the Galaxy Police — and now, with your help, I hope it might finally come to fruition.”

He reached into his pocket, pulling out a sheet of paper which he unfolded, pushing it across the desk towards his companions.

“This is a list of all the planets recently and not so recently involved in talks or negotiations with Jurai.” He said softly. “There are two names on here which are of particular interest, just to give you some idea of what we’re dealing with.”

His finger ran down the page.

“Kihaku.” He murmured. “A colony of Jurai, where the native people were suppressed and murdered. Few, if any surviving descendants of this planet remain. One of them is in residency here on the Earth — Professor Hakubi, the scientist who has worked so hard on Earth’s defences.”

“Hakubi?” Kane started. “Isn’t that the *pirate*’s name, too?”

“Yes, but it seems to be coincidental.” Nakabito admitted. “As far as it can be determined, Ryoko’s origins are Juraian. She might even have connections to the royal family itself. Professor Hakubi, by contrast, is Kii. From my sources, *she* has no reason to love the Emperor of Jurai, so she may yet prove to be an ally for you, even if she is not born on this world.”

“Hakubi-sensei, huh?” Ishida looked thoughtful. “I know the woman you speak of. Her scientific expertise is impressive — and she has not so far given us any reason to doubt her intentions. Are you saying that she is someone of alien blood we can trust? That the Earth may have allies that won’t choose to harm us in the long run?”

“I’m not sure about trusting anyone from outside.” Kane said hesitantly, and Nakabito smiled.

“You trust *me*, don’t you?” He asked softly. Kane started, then shrugged.

“I guess so. But you’re at least half Earthling — right?” He asked. Nakabito nodded.

“True enough.” He acknowledged. “But even so, and even though I understand the Earth’s anti-alien fears, I think that Jurai are the true threat to Earth’s safety at the present time. Professor Hakubi’s scientific reputation is legendary across many circles... even I’ve heard of her, and I’m not really involved in that kind of investigative work. I have discovered some interesting — if incomplete — documents suggesting that she has reason to bear a grudge against Jurai... If she is so adept at building defences for the Earth, she might yet go some way towards providing the planet with something more.”

“I’ll look into it.” Ishida promised, scribbling something down on his notepad and with a jolt, Kane realised that this young, amiable officer was the one putting the pressure on his friend’s father — that it was Nakabito, and not Ishida who was really controlling the operation.

The agent smiled now, nodding his head.

“I don’t think you’ll find her a problem.” He added. “Her reasons for hating Jurai are simple. Kihaku was destroyed by unknown weaponry eighteen months ago — all we know for sure is that it has some connection to Seiryō Tennan and his reasons for leaving the Galaxy Police... possibly even the Princess Sasami and her alleged cosmic power. Hakubi-sensei testified against Jurai in some kind of official hearing on that planet — during which she was fairly vehemently anti-imperial. Unfortunately I haven’t been able to access her full testimony, or full transcriptions from the hearing itself. I only have some vague, secondary reports — the agent investigating the matter was apprehended before he could transmit anything more concrete through secure channels. However, the little I have... is compelling stuff. Hakubi-sensei more or less postulated — to the Emperor’s face — that the destruction of her home planet was entirely the fault of Juraian invaders.”

“De... destroyed?” Kane whitened, and Nakabito nodded grimly.

“Blown to smithereens.” He agreed. “But even before that, the planet was a wasteland. As I said, the Kii were oppressed and killed for following their own beliefs and culture. Hakubi-sensei may indeed

be the last survivor of her race. At the moment... I cannot be certain.”

Kane swallowed hard.

“That doesn’t sound real good.” He admitted. Nakabito shook his head.

“The other planet of direct interest is Kanemitsu.” He said matter-of-factly, tapping a second name on the list. “A planet whose interests are somewhat dear to me, I have to admit, since my mother’s family are from that world. Currently it’s a Juraian dependant, although there have long since been ongoing negotiations for independence. Unfortunately for the Kanemitsu people, their last attempt at sending an envoy to Jurai ended in massive bloodshed aboard their ship Sumire. Everyone aboard the craft was killed.”

He paused for a moment, pursing his lips.

“My mother was among the delegates.” He added softly. “So as you can see, I have every wish to find justice.”

“Your mother?” Kane looked horrified, and Nakabito nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed. “She, like all the others, was slain aboard the Sumire and no satisfactory explanation or culprit for the murders has ever been properly put forward. Jurai have blamed a demon for the act — but it seems much more likely that some kind of cover-up has been put into play.”

His lips twitched into an ironic smile.

“Very few civilised minds believe in demons these days, after all.”

“And Seiryō Tennan is also involved in this, somehow?”

“According to sources, he was — at least in terms of finalising the official report that Jurai issued to Kanemitsu and the Galaxy Police at the time of the Sumire massacre.” Nakabito agreed. “Galaxy Police officials were also murdered during this particular incident — several of them. Some of whom were colleagues of mine who I respected highly, but despite the fact they gave their lives in service, no justice has been given their families either. Apparently life is dispensable, when it comes to the whims of the Emperor of Jurai.”

“That’s barbaric.” Kane whispered, gazing at Nakabito in horror. “They just killed them all, to make sure that the negotiations stalled?”

“Certainly it seems that way.” Nakabito agreed. “As I said, we are dealing with very dangerous forces indeed.”

He sat back in his seat, looking pensive.

“I don’t want to frighten you or cause widespread panic on the Earth. I just want you to be aware that this isn’t a small time operation, and that we’re very reliant on everything you people can do in terms of information and support.” He said at length. “My superiors are highly cognisant of the threat involved... as am I. But in the circumstances...”

“No, we have no choice.” Ishida said gravely. “Reviewing all the information, to do nothing is to wait to be walked all over. If we can help — if we can push forwards and prove that the Earth is not going to be another conquered planet in Jurai’s march, well, so much to the good. Don’t worry, Nakabito-san. I understand only too well what’s involved.”

“And you, Kyoda-kun?” Nakabito turned his gaze on the young graduate, who, for the first time, caught a glint of something beyond amiability in the man’s dark eyes. He frowned, then nodded his head.

“I’ll do it.” He said softly. “Whatever it takes to save the Earth... that’s all I care about. Making sure those aliens don’t get to take over this world and do to it what they’ve done to the others. Even if Masaki was my friend... if he’s supportive of that...”

He spread his hands.

“Some things are more important.” He concluded. “Don’t worry. I’m in.”

Nakabito offered him an approving grin.

“That’s what I like to hear.” he said warmly. “And on that note, I have other pressing matters to attend to.”

He saluted, a playful glint in his eye.

“Keep up the good work.” He added. “I’ll be in touch.”

With that he was gone, and Kane pursed his lips.

“Do you think... Ishida-san... that guy... all by himself, is he strong enough to take on Jurai?” He asked hesitantly.

“From all the things he’s said, he’s the best hope the Earth have right now.” Ishida said grimly. “Have faith in him, Kane-kun. All our lives may depend on it.”

As Nakabito withdrew from the entrepreneur’s office, he caught the man’s final drifting words and a smile touched his lips, amusement flecking in his dark eyes as he pulled his cape around his shoulders,

stepping out into the cool night air.

On this planet, he walked among the natives as one of them, thanks to his father's inauspicious Earth blood.

"A bartering card I never thought I'd find a use for." He reflected pensively, as he made his way slowly back towards the place he had securely moored and shielded his spacecraft. "Knowing and ingratiating myself with people on this planet... because my father was one of them, once upon a time. Interesting, isn't it, how things can change."

As he reached his craft, he fingered the band around his wrist, transmitting himself up into the cockpit and sinking down into the seat with a sigh as he rested his elbows on the dashboard, glancing at the communications device for any incoming messages. There were none, however, and he sat back, relieved.

"If Headquarters aren't chasing up on me, then I have some time to pan out the next stage of my plan." he reflected aloud. "The people here are obliging. Foolish and easy to manipulate, but obliging. However... their paranoia is still only at base level. Even spreading word about that alien girl Ryoko hasn't been enough. If I truly want to bring Jurai to heel, I have a long way to go yet. And annoying as it is, I'm reliant on Ishida and his followers to carry out things on the Earth. I sensed an element of uncertainty in them today — even my horror stories about the Sumire and Kihaku didn't seem to work. Which means... I'm going to have to up the stakes a little."

He narrowed his gaze, reaching across to key in some instructions, and a file flashed up on his screen.

"Ishida, Kenichi." He murmured. "A friend of that Kane, and the beloved son of my colleague... well, well. His involvement in this is... not crucial, yet. But it could be. It's been too long since the attack on Osaka. Many people have forgotten. I need them to realise how dangerous this connection is, and what better way than to hurt one of their own?"

He narrowed his gaze as he considered his next course of action, then, slowly, he nodded.

"Ryoko is on this planet." He reflected. "Although I have no personal axe to grind with the pirate, she's a useful scapegoat and foil. I'd dearly love it to be Tennan who was in my line of fire, but short of arousing Juraian suspicions prematurely, I can't even begin to think about that stage of things, yet. Not if I want to keep their noses out of it until it's too late for them to unmesh themselves from my web."

Anger flickered in his gaze as he remembered the last time he had seen Seiryō Tennan, and he folded his arms across his chest.

“Kanemitsu have tried to break away from Jurai for generations, but they’ve lacked the ruthlessness or decisiveness to play it dirty.” He reflected. “And people have died because of it — people like my mother — because noone is quite as underhand as the Emperor of Jurai and his hangers on when it comes to those kinds of strategies. Well, now things are different. This little matter in Osaka is just the evidence I need to turn Jurai’s dreams into nightmares once and for all. To bring down a big animal, you need a big trap — and now the Earth are making their voices heard, I have just the help I need to make it a reality. Seiryō Tennan and Jurai will finally be brought to book. Mother’s death will be avenged. And this pathetic little planet...”

He shrugged, flicking off his screen as he got to his feet, stretching his arms over his head.

“They won’t be a problem, in the long run.” he murmured. “I never did much care for my father, after all. It won’t grieve me too much if, in the aftermath of an unfortunate collision of interests, the rock was blown to smithereens. After all, it happened to Kihaku... Jurai really should be more careful when using deadly force in a protected zone.”

He chuckled under his breath at this thought, sauntering into the back of his ship to pour himself a mug of hot tea.

“And then there’s that woman, too.” He realised. “My spy didn’t manage to get much information, annoyingly, but enough to give me some insider details at least. I never thought that one of the regulars would potentially be my key to destroying Seiryō Tennan’s irritatingly perfect police record. He was the Commander’s darling for far too long — always the favoured agent, just because he had Juraian noble blood... just like when we were Academy students. Just like when Yuriko...”

He faltered, his humour fading for a moment, then he shook his head.

“But that was a long time ago. Now the stakes are higher. I’m cleverer, now, and I know how to fight on your level, Tennan-san.” He murmured. “I’ll talk to this Makibi girl, and see what she has to say about the attempt you made on her life. Did you finally find a girl who’d refuse your advances? If so, she’s someone I need to make an ally of... she might yet prove to be very useful to me, in the long run, in pitting you at the top of the blame list for this little fiasco!”

He smirked, a cold glitter entering his dark eyes.

“We’ll see who has the last laugh this time.” He decided. “When the smoke clears and we really see who’s left standing!”

*“Kiyoneeee!”*

As Kiyone left the ship docking bay, a tremendous shriek assailed her ears and she froze, wincing inwardly as she turned to greet her partner with a rueful, embarrassed grin. All around them, officers paused in what they were doing to stare as the Seniwan detective tripped clean over her own feet, almost falling headlong against her friend as she let out another screech, hands flailing as she struggled to get her balance. Wild blond curls flew in every direction, and Kiyone sighed heavily, reaching out an arm to halt her friend’s tumble before she could do herself any real harm.

“You know, when you do things like that, I’m almost ready to hop back aboard Yagami and leave again.” She said lightly, but as she met the other girl’s excited blue eyes, she knew that she was lying. Something in Mihoshi’s cheerful demeanour helped to sway her mind from the seriousness she had left behind on Jurai, and at length she relented, meeting the other girl’s grin with one of her own.

“Welcome back.” Mihoshi seemed impervious to the fact she had attracted so much attention, brushing her hair back from her face and then taking her companion by the arm, leading her towards the main foyer of the Galaxy Police Regular Division. “How was your friend? I was good and I told the Commander that you hadn’t gone anywhere. He kinda looked at me funny, but he didn’t ask any questions. So it’s all all right. Noone knows where you went.”

“Mihoshi, did you go and see the Commander especially to tell him that?” A flicker of doubt flared in Kiyone’s heart, and she cast her friend a doubtful glance. Mihoshi nodded, pride flickering in her blue eyes.

“I figured if I told him straight away, then he’d have nothing to be suspicious about.” She said happily. “And it worked. He didn’t ask any questions. In fact, after I’d finished, he told me not to bother him with anything else for the rest of the week... so I think it’s all right.”

“I’m sure he did.” Kiyone shook her head slowly. “Oh well. I’m back now. Anything happen while I was away?”

“I don’t think so.” Mihoshi chewed on her thumbnail as she ran her mind over the previous two days. “They served the same meal in the

cafeteria twice in a row, and I almost choked on the rice this morning — I swear they're using a new, sharper grain because it really hurt when I tried to swallow it."

"That wasn't quite what I meant." Kiyone shook her head. "I mean with cases. Or anything like that."

"Oh." Mihoshi frowned, then she shook her head. "You weren't here, so I didn't know what I should do."

"I suppose that's a good thing." Kiyone decided wryly. "So aside from almost choking, and from going to see the Commander, you didn't do anything else while I was away?"

"I took a nap or two." Mihoshi shrugged, offering her usual happy-go-lucky smile. "Oh yes. There was one other thing, too."

"Yes?" Kiyone was only half listening by this point, for it had been a long trip and she had not had much chance to rest on the voyage.

"Yes." Mihoshi nodded triumphantly. "Someone did come to leave you a message."

"A message?" Kiyone was startled by this, eying the other girl curiously. "What kind of message?"

"I don't know. I didn't open it." Mihoshi shrugged again.

"You didn't...?"

"It was addressed to you." Mihoshi pointed out. "And I was always taught you don't open other people's mail. So I didn't open it."

"Well, I guess I should, then." Kiyone pursed her lips, sliding her hand into her pocket as they reached her office, and producing the key. "It's in here, right?"

"Yes." Mihoshi agreed. "Or was it in your quarters? Oh, I don't remember... no, I think it was here. Yes, it must have been, because I remember I almost fell down the steps coming here to put it on your desk — or was it on the unit by your window?"

"It's on the desk." Kiyone crossed the office floor, scooping up the electronic card and brushing her finger across the seal to break it. She glanced at it for a moment, then slid it into the reading device, pressing a button as she sank down into her chair, watching as it flickered into life in front of them.

As they watched, a grainy, translucent face became visible, growing in intensity with each passing second, and Kiyone's brows knitted together as she gazed at the unfamiliar visage.



“Who the hell?” She murmured.

*“Detective Kiyone Makibi, First Class.”* The man spoke in formal, even tones, his expression non-committal, but Kiyone’s sharp eyes noted something glittering deep in the depths of his gaze.

*“This is a communication from the Galaxy Police Elite. My name is Agent Junichi Nakabito, and I would like to speak to you as soon as possible regarding a case I’m working on at present... I believe you might be able to provide me with some valuable information. Judging by your reputation, I’m sure I can trust in your discretion.”*

*“I will be away from my office until twenty two hundred hours, Galactic Calender 45-065. I would appreciate it if you would come to see me at zero seven hundred the following morning so that I can discuss this matter with you in the privacy of my office. Navigation instructions are enclosed with this message. Please be aware that this is a top secret matter and must be treated as entirely confidential. Thank you... Nakabito, over and out.”*

The message flickered and faded into a floor plan of the Elite Annexe, and Kiyone’s eyes narrowed as she ran a finger thoughtfully along the ghostly diagram.

“The opposite end to where Seiryō’s office was.” She mused. “I haven’t been in the Elite quarters since I was spying on him for Washu. And now... is this a coincidence? Or is it regarding what Kamidake and Sasami said?”

“Kiyone?” Mihoshi’s voice brought her back to herself and she frowned, reaching over to switch off the device.

“Yes?”

“You were spacing out and muttering to yourself — are you all right?” Mihoshi looked concerned. “Maybe you’re hungry...? You must be tired, after flying from... wherever it was you were flying from.”

“A little, maybe.” Kiyone sighed. “I’m sorry. I was just thinking about something.”

“Thinking when you’re tired isn’t a good idea, you know.” Mihoshi scolded. “You’ll just get more tired.”

“True enough.” Kiyone grimaced.

“Are you going to go see this person, then? When he asked you to?”

“Yes.” Kiyone said thoughtfully. “45-065... what’s the date today in Galaxy Police terms, Mihoshi?”

“The what?” Mihoshi blinked, and Kiyone sighed, shaking her head.

“Never mind.” She said wearily, reaching over to check her desk organiser. “45-063. Right. Okay. That gives me two... no, three days in total. I wonder if that’s enough time.”

“To do what?” Mihoshi’s eyes glittered with curiosity. “You don’t think it’ll take that long to find his office, do you? I know the Annexe is confusing, but he did send you a map — Kiyone, I don’t think it’ll be that hard.”

“No.” Kiyone shook her head, smiling despite herself at her friend’s screwy logic. “No, I wanted to review our case file, now I’m back. It sounds like this... Nakabito, whoever he is... wants me to do some work for him, and you never know with Elite Agents what they’ll get you involved in.”

“I think you should be careful, Kiyone.” Mihoshi said thoughtfully, and Kiyone frowned.

“Why so?” She asked softly. “Something bothering you, Miho?”

“Not especially.” Mihoshi shook her head, sending blond curls everywhere. “It’s just... I think the Elite are cursed. That’s all.”

“Cursed?” Kiyone’s eyes widened, and Mihoshi nodded.

“Yes.” She said seriously. “Think about it. Seiryō-san was an Elite, and he got possessed and he tried to kill you. Right? So he had to leave the Galaxy Police — but once he did, and went to work for Sasami, he was cured. Right?”

“Well...”

“And then there were those guys who were dead in Mitsuki’s office.” Mihoshi continued. “They were Elite Agents too — and they were dead because of it, right?”

“Mihoshi...”

“And the agents who died on that ship that went to Jurai.” Mihoshi finished. “What was it called? The Suntan?”

“The Sumire, Miho.” Kiyone rubbed her temples.

“That was it.” Mihoshi agreed. “Don’t you think that’s a weird coincidence, all those things happening to the Elite Agents?”

“No. Being an Elite is a dangerous job.” Kiyone shook her head. “More so than ours, you know.”

“But my Father was an Elite and noone killed him, or possessed

him, or anything like that.” Mihoshi said with a sigh. “So I guess they only got cursed recently. It must have been that way... don’t you think so?”

“What did you just say?” Kiyone looked startled, turning to stare at her friend, who eyed her in confusion.

“That the Galaxy Police Elite got cursed recently, which was really bad luck for them, when you think about it. Though I suppose a curse is bad luck anyway, so that does make sense...”

“No, not that. Before that. About your Dad.” Kiyone interrupted impatiently, and Mihoshi’s expression became one of comprehension.

“Oh! That he used to be an Elite Agent? Well, he did... you remember that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” Kiyone said softly. “And he worked on and around Jurai a lot, didn’t he? For the Royal Family — Ayeka’s family. Didn’t he?”

“He didn’t really talk to me about his work. It was secret stuff, you know.” Mihoshi shrugged. “Why? Is it important?”

“Mitsuru-sama also worked at the Galaxy Police Academy, didn’t he? He trained men... men like Seiryō. Didn’t he?”

“Yes, I think so.” Mihoshi looked confused. “I think he did some of that, while he was working still. But he’s retired now. Why do you want to know, Kiyone? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, yet, but I think it would be nice if we took a trip to Seniwa and paid your father a visit.” Kiyone said with a frown.

“Father? A visit?” Mihoshi stared at her as if she had gone mad. “But you just got back — Kiyone, why?”

“I want his advice on something, I think.” Kiyone reflected. “As someone who’s an Elite — or rather, a former Elite. And someone who trained Seiryō in encryption, among other things. I want to speak to him because he’s someone I know I can trust... do you think he’d mind, if we went to Seniwa at short notice?”

“No, probably not.” Mihoshi admitted. “And he always likes it when I visit, but... Kiyone, will you tell me what this is about?”

“If I knew myself, I would.” Kiyone sighed. “I just want an expert’s advice, I suppose. On something which might not even be Galaxy Police related. That’s all.”

“Is it something... about your friend, Kiyone?”

“Maybe.” Kiyone admitted. “I’m not sure, yet.”

Mihoshi’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Kiyone thought she saw a flash of perception surface in the big blue eyes. Then she nodded.

“All right. I’ll give him a call.” She dimpled, and the moment was gone. “And I’ll tell him that you want to speak to him about something but you don’t know what. Okay?”

“That about sums it up. Yes. Tomorrow, if we can.” Kiyone agreed. “Before I meet with Agent Nakabito and discuss whatever it is that’s bugging him. I’d rather deal with this before I have a bunch of other things on my mind.”

“Kiyone?”

“Yes?”

“You said your friend had lost someone close to them, didn’t you?” Mihoshi asked, and Kiyone nodded, looking surprised.

“Yes. His mother. Why?”

Mihoshi frowned again, then she shrugged, tilting her head on one side.

“I hope he’s feeling better.” She said evenly, and Kiyone’s brows knitted together.

“Something’s eating you — Miho, that was a strange look you just gave me. What’s up?”

“Nothing.” Mihoshi shook her head.

“Miho, spill.”

“Well...” Mihoshi pursed her lips, then, “You want to go see Father all of a sudden, and you don’t often do that. And you said... you wanted advice, and it might be about your friend.”

“Yes... so?”

Mihoshi paused for a moment, then she met Kiyone’s gaze head on.

“Your friend is Seiryō-san, isn’t it?” She asked softly, and Kiyone’s eyes widened.

“Mihoshi...”

“I knew it.” Mihoshi’s expression glittered with triumph. “I knew it was... it is, isn’t it? It was Seiryō Tennen you went to see... I knew it!”

“I...”

“Well? I am right, right? It was him?”

“Y... yes.” Kiyone owned. “But... how did you...?”

“I’m smart. That’s all.” Mihoshi dimpled.

“And now the real reason?”

“Hey!” Mihoshi looked hurt. Then she relented. “Well, it’s just you don’t have many friends outside of Headquarters who aren’t my friends too. You said him, and the only *him* friend we both really have is Tenchi. And his mother is already dead... right? And you were talking about Father’s teaching Seiryō-san just now — so it *must’ve* been him. Right?”

“Who are you and what did you do with Mihoshi Kuramitsu?” Kiyone demanded, and Mihoshi put her hands on her hips.

“I’m not completely stupid.” She said indignantly. “I do pay attention. It’s just that so many things happen and sometimes I have trouble putting them in the right order. That’s all.”

She frowned, suddenly serious.

“Poor Seiryō-san.” She added softly, sympathy glittering in her blue eyes. “First he gets possessed, then he has to go find Tokimi and Washu when they’re kidnapped by weird people on some savage planet, and now his mother’s died, too. It must be because the Elite are cursed... I guess it runs deeper than I thought.”

“Well, I don’t know about a curse, but he’s pretty shaken by it.” Kiyone sighed. “And I suppose that’s why I want Mitsuru-sama’s advice as much as anything. After all, he did know Seiryō — and he must’ve known him quite well, once upon a time.”

“In that case, I’ll call him right away.” Mihoshi agreed. “If it’s to do with something like that.”

She dimpled.

“For a moment I thought you wanted to see him about some icky or dangerous mission or something.” She admitted. “I’m sort of glad it’s not that.”

“Yeah.” Kiyone managed a smile, inwardly making up her mind not to involve Mihoshi in her spy detail for Jurai.

“She’ll never keep that a secret.” She mused to herself, even as she watched the blond girl head off to her own office to make the call. “I

didn't expect her to put two and two together and come up with Seiryō's name, but then I suppose she isn't completely dense — sometimes I underestimate the things she understands, and I shouldn't. Sometimes she can be perceptive, after all."

She sighed, casting a glance at the discarded message.

"And now this." She mused. "I want to ask Mitsuru-sama about what's going on on Jurai, as someone who knows both it and the Galaxy Police inside-out. And it might be that Nakabito wants to see me about something else... but it would be strange, if he did, considering what Sasami and Kamidake said to me. I expect it has some connection — if I'm going to meet with him, I want to know how to take it. Mitsuru-sama is the only one I can fully trust when it comes to Elite matters — well, Seiryō aside, but I can't bring him into this. That would defeat the object! So hopefully we will be able to go to Seniwa... if I take Mihoshi with me, it won't look suspicious. It's happened before, after all, and the Kuramitsu family do do things at short notice. So that'll be okay. And I know that once Mihoshi sees her mother, they'll be lost in chat and I'll be able to speak to Mitsuru-sama. At least, I hope I will... I really need his take on this!"

## Chapter 10

---

### Chapter Ten

“Well, I won’t pretend this isn’t unexpected, Kiyone-chan, although it’s a pleasure to see you, as ever.”

Mitsuru Kuramitsu sat back in his chair, casting his young companion a curious smile as she self-consciously took a seat of her own, folding her hands in her lap. It was the following day and, after three or four hours flight across the galaxy towards the central hub of Seniwa’s technological nucleus, Kiyone and Mihoshi had arrived at the Kuramitsu estate in time to be greeted with lunch and warm salutations from both of the young detective’s parents. Now, Mihoshi had been spirited away by her eager mother and Kiyone had at last found time to address her concerns with the former Elite Agent face to face, in his finely appointed study at the back of the impressive Kuramitsu home.

“Mihoshi said you had something you wanted to talk to me about — but she wasn’t all that clear on what it was... do you think you can enlighten me?” Mitsuru said now, eying her keenly as he gauged her demeanour. “If I can be of help, you know that I will — but Mihoshi seemed quite confused on the subject.”

“That’s probably because I am, too.” Kiyone sighed. “I’m sorry, Mitsuru-sama. It’s not totally fair, bringing this all to you... but I’m a bit muddled myself and I needed the advice of someone I can trust before I do anything stupid that I might live to regret. Or more specifically, *not* live to regret. If you see what I mean.”

“I do.” Mitsuru’s gaze became serious, and he nodded his head, gesturing to her to close the door. “In which case, this had better be a private conversation, hadn’t it?”

“Yes.” Kiyone leant across to do as she was bidden. “Thank you — I’m glad you understand.”

“Well, considering all the things you’ve done for Miho-chan, hearing you out is the least I can do, isn’t it?” Mitsuru offered her a smile, and Kiyone returned it, feeling faintly comforted by the familiar, almost paternal presence of the retired Elite Agent. In some respects, she reflected, Mihoshi had been extremely lucky in the parents she had been given, for between Mitsuru’s gentle, easy-going

intelligence and his wife's generosity and kind spirit, she had always had the utmost in understanding and support.

"Even to do things she might not otherwise do." She mused sadly. "Must've been nice... not to have had to fight the tide."

"Kiyone?" Mitsuru eyed her keenly. "What's on your mind? It looks like a lot is — but I can't help you unless you unburden yourself to me."

"Right." Kiyone sighed, nodding. "Well... Mitsuru-sama, you... taught Seiryō Tennen encryption, didn't you?"

"Seiryō?" Mitsuru's eyes widened in surprised. "This has something to do with him?"

"Maybe. No, definitely, but not directly." Kiyone rubbed her temples. "Yeesh, I'm already getting mixed up and I've barely even started. Let me see... how to make it more clear... the trouble is, I'm not even sure myself entirely what I'm trying to do... but..."

She frowned, then nodded her head, as inwardly she made up her mind to tell her companion everything.

"Seiryō and I are friends." She said frankly. "But when we began our acquaintance, it wasn't like that at all. In fact, we really met and got to know one another because he got wound up in something dark and evil, and well, he tried to end my life."

"Seiryō did?" Mitsuru could not look more startled. "*Your* life?"

"Yes." Kiyone agreed. "It wasn't his fault — he was possessed — but at the time, naturally, I was pretty wound up by it. And I hated him. I really thought he was some kind of monster. When Jurai held a formal hearing over the matter, I testified in it and gave evidence against him about when he attacked me."

"And now...?"

"Now I realise that it wasn't his fault. I mean, I have perspective — in fact, somehow, the fact he went through so much afterwards and so did I — it provided us with common ground." Kiyone ran her fingers through her hair. "He can be arrogant and stubborn and frustrating, but he's not the kind of man who sneaks around plotting murder. I know this now. He's really a direct kind of person if it comes to a confrontation — he'd rather draw his blade and fight."

"Oh yes. That does sound like the Seiryō I taught, indeed." Mitsuru's eyes flickered with faint humour, and Kiyone nodded ruefully.



“In any case, Seiryō’s mother died in the last week or so.” She continued slowly. “And Seiryō called me... he needed a friend, I guess that’s the best way of putting it. So I went to Jurai — in fact, I’d just come back to Headquarters yesterday. And I found a lot more going on than I’d bargained for.”

“On Jurai, this is often the case.” Mitsuru said wisely. “Something that’s concerning you, is it, Kiyone-chan?”

“Yes.” Kiyone agreed. “But it’s not just Jurai. It’s the Galaxy Police, too. And the planet Earth. None of it makes a lot of sense, but I still believe... well, the people who told me aren’t people who would lie about it. So I know it’s true. However...”

She groaned.

“I’m getting muddled again.” She realised. “But to cut a long story short, someone was arrested on Jurai for leaking secure information to some unknown outside source. The information in question related to the hearing I just mentioned — the one in which I testified against Seiryō. According to my sources on Jurai, two Elite Agents had also been to speak to the Emperor before this person was apprehended — about possible tensions and leaks in information between the Galaxy Police and the planet Earth on the subject of galactic life and in particular, Jurai itself. It sounded serious... as if the people on Earth were being schooled into disputing with Jurai. Almost as if...”

She faltered, biting her lip, and Mitsuru frowned.

“As if they were being used as bait, and Seiryō as the scapegoat?” He asked softly. Kiyone nodded, relief flickering in her blue eyes.

“Yes. That’s exactly how it seems.” She agreed. “I’m glad you understand — I’m not sure I even do, completely.”

“And you want my advice as to what to do about it?”

“Well, I already jumped the gun a little there.” Kiyone admitted. “I already said I would help if I could. Besides, it’s not fair. After the attack on me, Seiryō quit the Elite completely. He’s now based on Jurai, and has nothing to do with the Police at all. And this all happened over a year ago. So why are they so interested in it now? The Commander knows what happened, and the Emperor of Jurai dealt with it personally... it’s not like it got ignored.”

“Mmm.” Mitsuru rubbed his beard, considering for a moment. “That’s a loss to the Galaxy Police — or a gain to Jurai, one or the other. Flaws aside, Seiryō may well have been the most natural young agent I ever taught... it’s a blow to me to know he was forced into

leaving the service in such circumstances.”

“He told me he’s too proud to ever go back, but now, he can’t anyway.” Kiyone admitted. “Since his father died, he’s been Lord Tennan. And now he and his sister have guardianship of Tokimi, too — she’s sweet as anything, but impaired mentally and she adores Seiryō. He couldn’t leave Jurai long-term. Besides, he’s Princess Sasami’s advisor these days. He’s tied to his home-world.”

“And have you discussed any of this with him?”

“No.” Kiyone admitted. “Because he’s still grieving, and it’s affected him pretty badly. I don’t want him to have this to worry about as well as everything else he’s already dealing with.”

“But you do think he’s in danger of something?”

“Maybe.” Kiyone looked helpless. “But I sort of made a promise to try and find out. I mean, for Jurai’s sake, really. And the planet Earth. I have friends on both, and I don’t like the idea that someone might be manipulating either one.”

“It would be safer to stay out of it, Kiyone. You’re not trained to handle that kind of investigation.” Mitsuru looked apprehensive, and Kiyone shrugged.

“Well, I sort of am.” She admitted. “Seiryō... has trained me... some. I mean, in Elite procedure.”

“He has?” Mitsuru looked floored. Then he smiled.

“I suppose that he knows he’s in breach of regulations, doing so, but since he’s quit, he probably doesn’t care.” He mused. “You are too, though — so keep that quiet, all right?”

“I already am.” Kiyone assured him.

“Why not take the Elite training yourself, though, if that’s how you feel?”

“I... can’t.” Kiyone hesitated, and comprehension flooded Mitsuru’s clever features. He nodded.

“Because of Miho-chan.” He murmured. “I see. That’s quite a sacrifice you’re making for my daughter, Kiyone — are you sure that it’s one you can make without any regrets?”

“Mihoshi’s my friend, and I’ve made my decision regarding that.” Kiyone shrugged. “It’s just how it is — I’m fond of her and I won’t abandon her. But Seiryō thought I should be more prepared — in case someone else had designs on my life, because I’m quite good at my

job.”

“Mm.” Mitsuru pursed his lips. “Well... I’m sure he didn’t mean you should recklessly jump into something on his behalf.”

“Maybe not, but I can’t *not* do anything, can I?” Kiyone pointed out. “I have a feeling it’s a big deal, Mitsuru-sama. I really do. And that if it’s something that’s happening at Headquarters... if I stand back and ignore it, I’ll be partly to blame if something does.”

“Then how can I help you?” Mitsuru asked her gently. “Because obviously that’s why you’re really here.”

“Yes.” Kiyone agreed. “I suppose so. Mitsuru-sama, when I got back to my office, I had a message from an Elite agent called Nakabito. He wanted to meet with me — well, he’s going to meet with me — to discuss something relating a case he’s working on. It seems too sudden to be a coincidence.”

“Junichi Nakabito?” Mitsuru’s expression underwent a transformation. “Hrm. I see.”

“You see?” Kiyone frowned. “What is it... something I should know about him?”

“Well, he’s a first class agent.” Mitsuru smiled. “Hot-tempered, as I remember, and very self-righteous on occasion. Principled, too. Hard working, most of the time.”

“You taught him too?”

“Yes, I did.” Mitsuru inclined his head. “Although he didn’t have Seiryō’s aptitude for encryption, and chose other disciplines to focus on. His bent was towards undercover work, I believe — particularly surveillance espionage and matters of that nature.”

“Espionage?” Kiyone’s brows knitted together. “And he wants to see *me*...? He can’t know already that I’m spying for Jurai — I haven’t done anything yet!”

“No... I imagine that’s not it.” Mitsuru shook his head. “He’s probably covering bases — finding out what he can relating to everything you’ve already told me. And gauging which side you’re on... based on what evidence he has as well as speaking to you face to face.”

“The question is, can I trust him?” Kiyone asked hesitantly. “Or... not?”

“Well.” Mitsuru sighed. “As I said, he’s a first class agent. Far as I

know, he's got a fairly exemplary record. Probably not as glittering as your friend Seiryō's, but then he's a quite different kind of man."

"That's not exactly a yes or a no, Mitsuru-sama."

"No, I know." Mitsuru frowned. "Truth is... I've no real reason to think that there's anything untoward about Nakabito contacting you, or that he's doing anything other than his job. It's just..."

He spread his hands.

"When they were classmates, he and Seiryō were about as far from being friends as possible." He admitted. "Nakabito is from Kanemitsu, a planet with grievances against Jurai at the best of times. And Seiryō was the archetypal young Juraian noble, with every faith that his world was the only one worth respecting. There were... arguments. And eventually, a physical fight which ended with Seiryō's blade pointed at Nakabito's throat."

"A fight?" Kiyone's eyes widened. "Over what?"

"Women, I think." A wry expression touched Mitsuru's features, and he nodded. "Almost certainly women. It often was, in those days. Seiryō... well, I don't want to colour your impression of him — like as not he's a different man now. It's been eleven years or more since he was under my tutelage. But I think there were a couple of incidents involving women and Seiryō's habit of treating them rather like... temporary possessions."

"He did *what*?" Consternation flooded through Kiyone, followed by something else that she could not quite define. "Are you saying that Seiryō was some kind of womanising juvenile delinquent when he was at the Academy?"

"A young man let off the lead for the first time. That's all." Mitsuru eyed her in interest. "You look stunned — I guess things have changed. But then, he was eighteen then, you know."

He nodded.

"There were a few women, and the girls were always somewhat attracted to his aloofness... I don't know why it is, but girls always seem to like the ones they can't get." He reflected. "After the fight with Nakabito, I did have a long talk with him. And I think he took what I said on board. But I'm pretty sure that that incident in particular involved a young Seniwan woman to whom Nakabito was quite close. Maybe even a fiancée... something like that, I think."

"A fiancée?" Despite herself, Kiyone could not prevent her voice

from rising. “Seiryō stole someone’s *fiancee*... then ditched her like she was nothing at all? And I’m here because I want to *defend* him...? I’m starting to feel bad for Nakabito and the woman right now, not for Seiryō!”

“Oh, don’t look so serious.” Mitsuru looked amused. “Don’t tell me you never did anything stupid when you were at the Academy? The truth is, after that, Seiryō’s behaviour did tone down. I don’t believe he was truly meaning to be malicious, either. He just... well, he had that arrogance of nobility that allowed him to forget that other people had feelings and needs as well as himself. That’s all.”

He shrugged.

“Nakabito took it all pretty badly, though, if memory serves.” He reflected. “Losing first his woman, and then his pride to Seiryō’s superior fighting technique... I don’t think he really recovered from it. Pride is often the downfall of hot-tempered young men, that’s the truth of it — I’ve seen it time and time again. They never did really settle down as classmates afterwards. The girl quit the Academy, in the end — I don’t know the circumstances, or if it even had anything to do with Seiryō or Junichi — but it did nothing to help create peace.”

“So basically, Nakabito has good reason to not be on Seiryō’s side in this.”

“I imagine that if he was given a choice between shooting himself and becoming Seiryō’s ally, he’d take the gun.” Mitsuru admitted, and Kiyone’s eyes widened.

“That bad?”

“He was a good young agent.” Mitsuru nodded. “But he had one serious flaw. He had a habit of holding onto grudges. If I’m remembering rightly, his background was a matter of some awkwardness, and Seiryō was the kind of young aristocrat who was prone to being scathing about such things, back then. I don’t recall the details, but I think Nakabito’s father and mother were never married — that his father was a wastrel from some remote planet somewhere who absconded when he was very small — and his tutelage at the Galaxy Police Elite was funded almost entirely by his hard work in earning scholarships and making ends meet.”

“Not unlike me, then, I suppose.” Kiyone looked thoughtful. “He wanted it, so he worked for it, and he got it in the end.”

“Yes.” Mitsuru agreed. “And because Seiryō hated him, he didn’t

mind reminding him of that fact.”

“It doesn’t make Seiryō sound much of a human being, when you talk about him like that.” Kiyone looked doubtful. “Were you really fond of him, even despite all of this? He sounds like the ultimate pain — the class bully, and a really heartless jerk, to be honest.”

“Yes...” Mitsuru rubbed his chin pensively. “However, we are all the products of our past. I never met Seiji Tennan, and I never had a coherent conversation with Seiryō about him. The absence of such a conversation told me far more than it would have if Seiryō had confided in me, Kiyone. I suppose I made allowances for Seiryō’s temperament because, aside from his obvious talent, his own background was less than sympathetic. I hoped that, if I continued to work with him and fashioned him into a good agent, he might one day realise the things that Seiji-sama never taught him. That the longer he was away from Jurai, the greater his chance of breaking the Tennan family mould.”

He smiled ruefully.

“The Tennans are a legend on Jurai, and even here on Seniwa the name is known.” He added. “For their influence as well as their arrogance and their ambition. I suppose I wanted to tame the beast — to try and channel Seiryō’s Tennan blood into something that would be ultimately beneficial to the Galaxy Police and to the universe as a whole.”

Kiyone was silent for a moment, considering.

“I... I suppose you did.” She admitted. “He isn’t... like that now. At least, I don’t think he is. Even if he is arrogant sometimes... he’s not... cold inside. Kaede-sama’s death has proven that as much as anything.”

“But to Nakabito, he’s probably still the enemy he remembers from his Academy days... and it’s a grudge that has had some time to fester.” Mitsuru said softly.

“I see.” Kiyone frowned. “So... if this Nakabito really does want to talk to me about Seiryō, chances are it’s not to help him out.”

“Chances are.” Mitsuru agreed. “Although I hesitate to taint the reputation of a good agent with my speculation.”

“It’s that kind of thing I need.” Kiyone shook her head. “Really. I appreciate it.”

“Even if it means blotting Seiryō’s name with tales of his adolescent misdemeanours?”

“Well, it’s not like it matters to me how many women he did or didn’t sleep with when he was at the Academy, does it?” Kiyone shrugged her shoulders, though inwardly she wished she felt as nonchalant as her words seemed. “It’s pretty pathetic, but it’s nothing to do with me.”

She sighed.

“On the same lines, then, is there anyone among the current agents who I might be able to trust?” She asked. “Sasami — I mean, *Princess* Sasami — gave me the names of the agents who came to Jurai to see the Emperor. Ryousuke Takamura and Hideki Imaguchi. Do you know either one?”

“Takamura... Imaguchi...” Mitsuru’s eyes narrowed, and he grinned. “Well, well. This really is turning into a matter of old rivals, isn’t it?”

“Mitsuru-sama?” Kiyone stared, and the former Elite held up his hands.

“Seiryō didn’t really go in for friends, at the Academy.” He said evenly. “But if he had anyone you could call that, I would have said that it would’ve been Takamura and Imaguchi. He spent more time with them than he did any of the other students. Both come from high-born families — Imaguchi is Seniwan, Daimyo born like myself, and Takamura is the second son of the current Lord of Yubisu, one of Azusa-sama’s vassals. Both are also very intelligent, sensible, and honourable men, and Takamura was educated on Seniwa as a boy — the two of them were close friends even before they’d arrived at the Academy to train.”

He smiled ruefully.

“I encouraged Seiryō’s connection to them because of how steady both were, though I don’t suppose he really opened himself up to anyone whilst he was there.” He admitted.

“Truly, he was a lone wolf in many ways, but anything but a pitiful one. He didn’t lack for attention or admirers — his solitary attitude was by choice, not because he felt marginalised. But he did socialise with those two — and yes, I’d say they were friends as much as Seiryō allowed anyone to be his friend. Imaguchi certainly had a way of keeping him in line, so it seemed at times... but in truth, they both respected what he could do as a fighter and as an agent in other regards. I would have thought that if they went to Jurai, they’re probably already looking into this from his point of view — to help, rather than to hurt him. And that they’re likely keeping an eye to

Nakabito too, because there was no love lost there, either. Nakabito did not let his grudge against Seiryō go, even to the point he would try to spur the boy's temper and bring him into trouble... there were some harsh words spoken between him and Imaguchi on the subject a few times... though to his credit, Seiryō never did react in the same impulsive way again."

"So Seiryō's old friends are joining forces against Seiryō's old enemy, huh?" Kiyone grimaced. "It's worse than a school reunion, so far."

"Well, my advice is that you should stop pursuing this, and leave it to the experts." Mitsuru said frankly. "But if you must — and I suspect you will — ignore my counsel, then you *should* probably speak to either Imaguchi or Takamura. But as I said, I'm not casting judgement against Nakabito. I just feel... with his and Seiryō's past... it's the one thing that counts against him."

"I'll bear that in mind. All of it." Kiyone nodded her head. "And I'll make sure I speak to those agents, too. I... I understand what you're saying, about my safety. But a promise is a promise, and even if Seiryō did some stupid, male things when he was a teenager — he's really upset at the moment. Karma may have kicked him a little too hard in the teeth... even knowing this stuff, I still want to help him. Call me a sucker if you like — but I sort of feel I have to. Besides, I gave Princess Sasami my word I'd help, so I can't go back on it now."

"Then it might be better if my daughter were not around to impede your progress, mightn't it?" Mitsuru frowned. "If I were to keep Mihoshi here for a week or two, I don't suppose the Commander would object. I still hold some sway in Police circles, and she doesn't take leave here very often, really. Would that be a good idea, do you think? I doubt that Mihoshi would ask too many questions, if it was me asking her to stay — and to be honest, I'd like the excuse to spend some time with my eldest, too."

"I think it would be better, yes." Relief flooded Kiyone's expression. "I wasn't sure what to do about that. I mean, I like Mihoshi and I don't want to ditch her... but this is... well, it could be dangerous for her and she can be indiscreet. It'd be a load off my mind to know she wasn't involved."

"Then that's what we'll do." Mitsuru nodded. "No problem. Just promise me to be careful, Kiyone. And if you do speak to those Agents, listen carefully to the advice they give you, too. They're trained and they're good men... your safety might rely on their experience."



“I will.” Kiyone nodded, getting to her feet. “I promise, I’ll do just that. But I do want to get to the bottom of this. If it is as big as it sounded, when Sasami and Kamidake spoke to me, I can’t sit back and ignore it. Still, I’m not going to get myself killed over it — I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“Then it is official.”

Ayeka pulled her wrap more tightly around her shoulders, her eyes glimmering with excitement and anticipation as she leant up against the comforting bark of Tsunami’s holy tree. She nodded her head, casting her young companion a smile. It was early the next morning and, a million miles away from the intrigue unfolding on planet Earth, the Crown Princess of planet Jurai had summoned her young sibling out to the Royal Forest, eagerness in her rich red gaze as she contemplated sharing her news.

“But you already knew that, didn’t you, little sister?” She asked softly. “I know — it’s in your eyes. Tsunami’s concern for me... you’ve been suspecting me for a while. I wanted to tell you, but I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

“Yes and no.” Sasami admitted, dimpling as she slipped her hand into her sister’s, squeezing it tightly. “But I wasn’t kidding, Ayeka, when I said Tsunami wanted you to take care. It’s not just... well... you know how it is. You need... to conserve your strength. And not worry us all by collapsing in the Council Chamber.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Ayeka turned her gaze on the younger girl, who shrugged.

“You’ve been with Uncle when he’s been discussing things with Galaxy Police Elite, haven’t you?” She asked softly, and Ayeka looked startled.

“Yes... what of it?”

“I don’t think you should be worrying about any of that nasty spy stuff.” Sasami said frankly. “You should let me handle it. I’m going to be fourteen soon enough, and I’m Tsunami’s representative, so I’m not a baby. And if you think Uncle or Father is going to let you fly to the Earth if you’ve worn yourself out...”

She faltered, and Ayeka laughed, touching her companion playfully on the cheek.

“You have no confidence in my strength, do you?” She teased lightly. “I’m going to be just fine, you know. I promise. I’m tougher

than you think I am. And besides, you really don't want to be involved in all of this, little sister... it's messy enough without dragging you into it, especially since, at present, Lord Tennan is not available for comment."

"Yes." Sasami frowned, biting her lip as she led them down to the edge of the little stream that ran through the palace grounds, sinking onto the grass and pulling her older companion down beside her. "But Ayeka, we both know that this has a lot to do with Seiryō, don't we? And with me. Seriously, I *want* to be involved. Father said that it would be up to me, when I wanted to do things like that. And this time I really do. I want to protect you, and I want to help Seiryō, as well."

"I'm sure you do." Ayeka settled herself more comfortably at the water's edge. "But the truth is, there isn't much you can do about it. None of us can."

She frowned.

"You know that the spy we had in custody managed to kill himself yesterday morning." She added. "Before Father could put him to the truth serum. It was a poison stitched into the folds of his clothing — as if he'd come prepared. We don't even know his true name — just the name he gave to gain admission into Jurai. Where he was from is a mystery. Father's ordered an autopsy, to determine at the very least his genetic origin... but without his testimony, we have no way of knowing what has been leaked or who is behind it. There's really nothing to protect me from, imouto-chan. We've hit a dead end."

"Maybe." Sasami sighed, then, "Oneechan, did you know that Kiyone was on Jurai a few days ago?"

"Kiyone?" Ayeka's expression became one of shock, and she shook her head, hurt flickering in her ruby eyes. "No. Why didn't she come say hello? I would have thought..."

"She came to see Seiryō, Ayeka."

"To see... *Seiryō*?" Shock flooded Ayeka's pretty features, and Sasami nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "He asked her to come, and so she did."

"But..." Ayeka faltered. "I don't understand. Because of Lady Tennan's passing? Or... are they such close friends as that?"

"I guess they are." Sasami toyed absently with a blade of grass. "The thing is, Kamidake and I sort of told Kiyone something about

what had been happening on Jurai, because we were worried that her name might get pulled into things. And she offered to find out information, if she could. I don't know... if it's dangerous. But she said she wanted to help. She... she thinks that there's a danger that someone's using the Earth as some kind of scapegoat in a plan to attack Jurai. And that Seiryō and I are going to be pulled into it, too. Especially him — because of what happened when he was possessed by Tokimi. And I know that, if that carries on, we won't be allowed to go to Earth. If things get worse, we might never be able to go there again. It might... it might even get destroyed. And because of that, I want... to help. Because in a way, it's up to me to help, isn't it?"

Ayeka's expression became serious, and slowly she shook her head.

"Uncle would never sanction you getting involved in anything dangerous if he could prevent it." She said evenly, and Sasami's eyes narrowed.

"I'm Tsunami." She said frankly, and Ayeka's eyes widened at the resolution in her companion's tones. "I'm not so easy to kill — we've proven that time and time again. Tsunami protects me... and I'm not as weak as most teenagers, Oneechan. But as it stands, right now, you're more important than I am. To Jurai... you know that this is the only chance you have... and if you mess it up..."

"What do you mean, the only chance I have?" Ayeka stared at her, and Sasami bit her lip, taking her companion's hands in hers as she met her sister's gaze with a solemn one of her own.

"Princesses of Jurai don't usually have more than one child, you know. Not without hurting themselves. Not if the child is going to be born with Jurai's power." She said softly. "And yours is, Oneesama. He will be... he will be a Prince with Jurai's magic running through him. But he will be the only child you'll ever bear. And because of that... for Jurai's sake... you have to be safe. So please, let me be involved. I don't want anything to happen to you. Not now... not now you're expecting Jurai's heir."

Ayeka was floored for a moment, then she rested a hand on her sister's shoulder.

"You are so much an adult sometimes, it scares me." She admitted with a sigh. "Knowing these things that noone should know."

"Perhaps." Sasami admitted. "But listen, Oneechan. I don't know why that spy was here, or whether the Galaxy Police can solve things. But I do know that if I don't know the things I need to know, I can't tell them to Kiyone. And she can't tell me anything in return. And if

Earth is in danger, it might be Tenchi and Ryoko and everyone there. And even if it isn't, something bad is happening around Seiryō and even though he might not be a friend of yours, he is a friend of mine and I'm worried... he's going through enough as it is, and I want to help him. And on top of all of that, Oneesama, if we go to the Earth and anything happens to you — I can't let that happen. I can't let anything hurt my sister or my nephew. Jurai needs you both... after all."

"You're so confusing." Ayeka reflected. "But I think I understand your line of thought. And I... I'll talk to Uncle, if it's what you want. About you being included. In Seiryō's absence, he might not approve... but you are right. Father did say that it was up to you. And when you talk like this, little sister, it's easy to see why."

She bit her lip, then,

"You think this is going to be hard for me, don't you?" She murmured softly, and Sasami hesitated for a moment. Then she nodded.

"I know it will be." She admitted gravely. "Like it was for Lady Achika when Tenchi was born, or Funaho-sama when Uncle was born. Mother only escaped because of Tsunami's power — don't you realise that? Because Tsunami needed her to be strong enough to bring me into the world and raise me to understand all the things I do. It's dangerous... and I don't want you to take it lightly. Because the boy *will* be born with Jurai's power. He *will* be an Emperor, one day in the distant future. But only if you respect the strain on your body and allow other people to take the reins for a bit. I mean it, Oneesama. I'm not a little girl any more, and I want to do my bit. After all, one day, I'll be there for you like Father is for Uncle."

She chewed on her lip, then,

"I could help raise him, if the need arose." She murmured. "But neither Tsunami or I want that. It's not meant to be that way. So you must listen to me, Ayeka. And do as I say."

Ayeka sighed heavily, running her fingers through her thick hair as she digested her companion's words.

"You mean back out of government completely until its all over?" She asked softly. "And let you take my place, even though Takeru is there to act in my stead, and you are just a child?"

"Yes." Sasami said evenly. "I'm decided. Since Kiyone came, since I learnt about this plot, since I knew you were going to have a son. I've

thought about it and I'm decided."

"And Tenchi's wedding? When I gave him my word?"

"Tenchi won't have a wedding, unless we sort out whatever's happening between Earth and Jurai." Sasami said with a troubled frown. "I hope Kiyone knows what she's doing... I don't want her hurt, and I'm really worried about all of this. About how she's putting herself at risk again, like she did... when Seiryō hurt her."

"Surely Lord Tennan isn't..."

"No..this time she's doing it for his sake." Sasami frowned. "Among other things. That worries me too, to be honest. I'm worrying about too much, I know — it sucks. But I do."

"Do you suspect... partiality on Kiyone's part?" Ayeka asked, and Sasami started, staring at her.

"Partiality?"

"Bizarre as it seems to me, is it possible that she's begun to think of Seiryō the way you think of Kamidake?" Ayeka asked softly, and Sasami reddened at the reference to her crush, shrugging her shoulders.

"She said they were just friends." She responded. "I don't know. Do you think so?"

"I can't imagine anyone falling in love with a man like Seiryō Tennan, even despite what he's done as your advisor." Ayeka said frankly. "But to put her life in danger for him... seems somewhat extreme for someone as sensible as Kiyone. If you really do think she's putting her life in danger."

"Maybe." Sasami contemplated this for a moment, surprise in her crimson eyes. "I hadn't thought about it like that."

She sighed.

"But Seiryō isn't as bad a person as you think. On the contrary... right now he's hurt a lot." She added. "Just like you or I'd feel if Mother or Father died. It's not fair that all this leak stuff is happening right now, no matter what. Perhaps she just feels sorry for him, because of that."

She tilted her head, eying her companion with a slight smile.

"Does Takeru know yet, that he's to be a father?" She asked. "Or am I the first to know?"

“You’re the first, but I will tell him tonight.” Ayeka responded with a faint smile. “When I have a moment to get him alone. And then, tomorrow, both our parents and Uncle must be informed. But for now, sister, it’s just between you and I.”

She frowned.

“Takeru’s concerned about Seiryō too, to be honest.” She acknowledged. “It’s surprised me, but apparently my husband shared some closeness to Seiryō’s mother, once upon a time. I know he wants to attend her memorial — though whether it will come off or not, I don’t know. Seiryō still seems to bear him quite a lot of malice for events past.”

“They clash.” Sasami admitted. “But I think it would be good to call a truce. Lady Kaede was a kind woman — I think it would be sad, if Takeru couldn’t attend her memorial. Do you want me to talk to Seiryō about it?”

“I think Takeru wants to do so himself.” Ayeka sighed heavily. “I’m not sure its wise to seek out a grieving rival at the moment, but if that’s how he feels...”

“Men are strange like that.” Sasami reflected. “But maybe if you tell him about the Prince, he’ll change his mind and be distracted.”

“You’re really so sure that it’s a son, Sasami-chan?”

“Yes.” Sasami raised solemn eyes to her sister’s. “I could tell you his name, too, but I guess you want some surprises to look forward to, huh?”

“If you don’t mind.” Despite herself, Ayeka looked rueful. “I’d like to think *I* named my child, especially if he is the only one I will ever bear. Not Tsunami’s will.”

“So I won’t tell you.” Sasami dimpled. “And then you will be able to.”

She flexed her hands, glancing at them.

“I’m happy for you, Oneesama.” She murmured. “And for Jurai. I just hope that Kiyone can find something out — or do something — to prevent relations between Earth and Jurai going bad. After all, if they did, and something were to happen... we might never be able to see Tenchi and Ryoko ever again.”

# Chapter 11

---

## Chapter Eleven

The Council Chamber was quiet by the time Takeru reached it that evening, and as he pushed back the doors, he pondered for a moment on the Emperor's last instructions, before he had retired to take care of some other more local business matters. The weight of the responsibility hung heavy over the Prince Consort's head and he pursed his lips, a serious look in his dark eyes as he realised how much his King had trusted him.

"I'm not Ayeka." He reflected out loud, making his way slowly between the rows of empty seats to the dais that rose up out of the centre of the chamber. "And I'm not Prince Haru. To be given a matter of this much delicacy to handle..."

He frowned, sinking down into the empty seat as he reached across to control the communications screen that, during Council session was generally scrolled back out of the way. Hitting the button, he watched as the translucent plate lowered slowly down before him, and he sighed, sitting back in the chair as he reflected on the extra responsibility.

Despite his pride in having been asked, something also ate away inside of him.

"This matter relates to Sasami." He muttered. "If Seiryō had been here... if he had been here... Lord Azusa would have asked him to undertake this, not me. He's the one with the connections to the Galaxy Police. He's the one who knows these agents and whether or not they are men who can or cannot be trusted by Jurai. More importantly, much as I hate to admit it, he's the one better trained to handle this kind of situation. In comparison, I'm a shadow of a negotiator, and not experienced enough in the ways of the outer universe. If Ayeka had not been taken ill again this afternoon, I would not be here in her stead, either. And if Lord Haru had not had other pressing business..."

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

"I am last choice." He admitted to himself ruefully. "But at least the Emperor doesn't make it seem that way, when he makes a request. Still, a lot rests on this. Particularly since we've discovered little about

the death of that man — or where he came from to Jurai.”

He sighed, flicking the communications switch as he keyed in the dial code for the Galaxy Police central command. As he connected to the intergalactic network, he punched in the diversion number for the direct line, and in a moment, a familiar face flashed up on the screen, bowing his head respectfully as he recognised the speaker.

“Prince Consort... I was hoping it was Jurai calling.” He spoke in soft tones, edged with a southern Seniwan accent, and Takeru smiled, returning the formal greeting as he nodded his head.

“Imaguchi-san — I’m sorry for the delay.” He said very properly. “And for the news I’m about to convey. I think that Prince Haru may have already sent word about the other morning’s unfortunate events — surrounding the individual in our custody?”

“Yes.” Imaguchi’s expression became grim. “It’s unfortunate, but sadly, not uncommon. There are underground spy networks and agencies with die-hard fanatics working at high stakes and for high prices. It’s a shame that he hasn’t been questioned but in the circumstances... I imagine that he was prepared to take his life as soon as he was imprisoned. The fact he did not suggests that either he had some other way of communicating information to outside, or he thought that he still stood a chance of escaping from his bonds. Even so...”

“Even so, we failed, and my Lord Emperor sends his distinct apologies for that fact.” Takeru said seriously. “The body has been examined by the forensic physician, and they’ve determined nothing significant in his genetic ident. The man was a rogue — a mongrel, but the scientists believe he was probably of Kanemitsu extraction. We’re doing our best to trace him, but it’s as you say. Underground organisations have their own protection drills — I doubt that we’ll have much luck in that quarter.”

“Still, that the plot was uncovered, that’s something to be reassured by.” Imaguchi frowned, running fingers through his thick hair. “Since we returned from meeting with yourselves, Lord Takeru, we’ve done a fair bit of research of our own. And you can thank the Emperor for providing us with the material he has. That the spy had access to it is concerning for both Takamura and myself... even in incomplete form. The hearing report is... incriminating. And potentially inflammatory, if it was to hit public networks that a man of high Juraian standing committed such crimes whilst still in Galaxy Police uniform.”

“It seems to me that someone is banking on that fact.” Takeru said



grimly, and Imaguchi nodded his head.

“Yes. Us too.” He agreed. “And I still think that, at some point, speaking to Lord Tennen would be beneficial. At least so that we had the story from his perspective.”

“At the moment, that’s not possible. Seiryō is unavailable.” Takeru said slowly. “He has recently suffered a bereavement — I think you know that, from when you were here. He is not yet back at court, and Lady Sasami has been quite firm on the matter — he is not to be disturbed. I also agree with this dictum... Seiryō’s past is past, and none of us wish to drag it up again. It was an uncomfortable time for several of us and we don’t feel it would be good to remind him of it whilst he is still coming to terms with his loss.”

Imaguchi’s eyes narrowed.

“Lord Takeru, do you mistrust Seiryō Tennen’s motives?” He asked softly. “You sound like you’re of the opinion that any connection between him and our organisation is likely to cause further trouble — do you suspect him of still conspiring against Juraian interests?”

“Not at all.” Takeru shook his head. “Only that his links to the Galaxy Police Elite have been severed, and at present, it is better for Jurai that they stay that way. Particularly considering the nature of your investigation.”

“Perhaps.” Imaguchi did not seem convinced. “And Jurai is not a planet we can force into doing anything, we both know that, Takeru-sama. So if that’s the official stance, we will have to accept it. Still... I wish you’d at least consider mentioning it to Seiryō, if you have an opportunity. We’re not strangers to him, after all, and we are fighting his corner — or at least, attempting to do so. It might be important... on its own, some of this evidence is damning.”

Takeru sighed, biting his lip.

“I can’t go against the will of Lady Sasami.” He said softly. “She is the one to whom he answers, and she outranks me in that kind of judgement. I have no business with Seiryō Tennen outside of the Council, and I am certainly not his liege lord to go summoning him at whim. This is just how it is, Agent Imaguchi. I can’t change that.”

“I see.” Imaguchi’s piercing gaze seemed to stare right through him. “I apologise. I had not realised that the Prince Consort of Jurai was ranked equally among the nobility... forgive me.”

Takeru flinched slightly at this, his eyes narrowing in annoyance as he digested the slight in the Seniwan’s even words.

“Please do not put words into my mouth, Agent Imaguchi.” He said coldly. “I made it quite clear that it is to Lady Sasami that you need apply if you wish to speak to Seiryō Tennan. Or to my Lord Emperor — both of whom, I’m sure you recognise, more than outrank my own current position. Unless, of course, Seniwani society is so diverse from our own that you’ve forgotten that an Emperor and a Goddess are more important than a high-born noble of the realm?”

Imaguchi looked startled for a moment. Then a rueful smile touched his lips.

“Yes. I suppose I did cross a line there.” He admitted, holding up his hands. “I am sorry, Takeru-sama. I did not mean to question your standing. Of course you are correct... I apologise. But it is frustrating, nonetheless.”

“I can’t see how Seiryō’s involvement would help the case.” Takeru reflected. “Since you have the film of the hearing — you know the events that occurred.”

“Seiryō was not questioned under truth serum, however.” Imaguchi said thoughtfully. “You forget, Takeru-sama, that Takamura and I both knew him well — possibly better than you, in some respects. And there is much revealed by that video — but also many things concealed. I know how Seiryō works and I know that he gave the minimum amount of information necessary during that hearing. He barely spoke, except to confirm or negate details, and on some subjects he remained completely silent. I confess, I had hoped to play on our prior friendship, and gain information from him that he did not feel comfortable divulging before the Emperor.”

“Such as?” Takeru was alert at this, and Imaguchi shrugged.

“Anything which we might be able to use in the resolution of this case.” He admitted. “The truth is, we’re scraping the barrel for information. We know there is a leak in our department, and we know that several agents are also looking into the matter. However, we don’t know for certain which of these we can or cannot trust. There are a couple that are suspect in our eyes, but this is based only on personal prejudices — on judgements, not facts. And most significantly, we lack the connecting pieces of the puzzle. That Jurai and the Earth are both involved, this seems beyond doubt. But it no longer seems to be a simple case of novice paranoia on the Earth’s part. In fact, the more we look into it, the less we think the Earth has any benefit to draw from opposing Jurai in any way. They must realise the dangers... so it seems someone or something is influencing them. Seiryō’s been there, and we’ve heard a lot about his apparent

raid on the Earth town called Osaka. If we could hear it from him... so much the better.”

“Then you must apply to my Emperor, but I suspect he will refuse.” Takeru shook his head. “Since the Hearing, Imaguchi, Seiryō has done nothing to excite the suspicion of Jurai’s council. He has been forgiven and absolved, and brought back into the Emperor’s trust. To drag up such an old, closed crime would be to shatter that absolution... I suspect Azusa-heika would say that it’s closed and that it should stay so.”

“I wish we could be as generous.” Imaguchi said frankly. “At the very least, the man was an idiot — an uncharacteristic trait for a Tennan if ever there was one. But very well. I can see I’ll make no progress with you on that matter tonight.”

“There is something else?”

“Yes.” Imaguchi admitted. “The girl known as Tokimi — she is a ward of Jurai, correct?”

“Yes, she is.” Takeru agreed. “The Emperor took her in after Kihaku’s destruction, and she lives with the Tennan family — as their charge.”

“She no longer poses a threat of any sort, then?”

“She has the mind of a child.” Takeru shook his head. “She’s an innocent — sweet, but delicate and definitely not dangerous. The magic involved — I understand it was extremely powerful. The damage done to Tokimi’s brain was irreversible — I doubt she even remembers most of what happens. Certainly her chief interest in life seems to be collecting and displaying flowers — that’s about the extent of her capabilities, however.”

“Then that’s a line of enquiry we probably don’t need to go down.” Imaguchi reflected. “If she is so... damaged. It occurred to me that she might be a key in the door, but if she’s as you say...”

“I’m sure that my Lord Emperor would not object to you receiving the psychological assessment doctors did on the girl when first she came out of her coma.” Takeru suggested. “He told me to provide you with any documentation you needed to file this case, and if it would rule Tokimi out of your suspects...”

“That would help.” Imaguchi agreed. “With Azusa-heika’s permission.”

“Indeed.” Takeru smiled.

“Takeru-sama — you also travelled to the Earth, correct? And Seiryō threatened your life, too?”

“He did, but he was possessed. His eyes were like nothing I’ve ever seen.” Takeru frowned at the recollection. “I won’t pretend there haven’t been noble rivalries between his family and mine — you’re of Daimyo stock so you understand the tensions among the noble class without me explaining them to you. But he was not himself when we fought on the earth. He had a devil within him — of that I have no doubt.”

“He must have done, to act so completely contrary to his usual good sense.” Imaguchi said bluntly. “Very well. If we can’t speak to him ourselves, Takeru-sama, I don’t think there’s anything else I have left to ask. Azusa-sama made it clear that speaking to Lady Sasami would be impossible, so I suppose we’ll have to make do with what you’ve given us. And the autopsy report for the suspect, if that’s possible... so we can conduct our own enquiries on that front, too.”

“Yes. That I can provide.” Takeru nodded, reaching over to flick a switch. “I’m transferring it now. And if you glean anything, we’d like to know about it, too. This is, after all, Jurai’s jurisdiction... as well as your own.”

“Of course.” Imaguchi agreed. “Agent Imaguchi, over and out.”

The screen faded to black, and Takeru gazed at it for a moment, deep in thought. It had riled him more than he liked to admit, when the agent had made his searing comment about Juraian standing, and ruefully he acknowledged to himself that even now, the rivalry of years past still hovered, waiting to play a part in the present.

“But it can’t. Not now.” He told himself firmly. “Seiryō and I are no longer boys, and we’ve no longer the time for such things. If I wish to be more indispensable to Jurai’s throne, I must do it by being stronger myself — not by seeking to bring him down. Whatever his feelings on the matter — the time for conflict is over. And this threat to Jurai — solidarity is important and I won’t be the divisive piece in the puzzle.”

“Takeru?”

His wife’s voice startled him back to himself and he glanced up, getting to his feet as he registered the Princess’s presence. He frowned, pressing the button to send the screen back into its usual storage position and then stepping down towards her, concern in his dark eyes as he registered her still pale cheeks.

“Ayeka-chan... are you feeling better? Are you sure you should be

up and around?" He asked softly, and Ayeka laughed, nodding her head as she held out her hands to him.

"I've been looking for you." She said evenly. "I didn't expect to find you here."

"Azusa-sama asked me to speak to the Galaxy Police, and give them the results of the autopsy." Takeru explained. "Your timing was good — I'd just finished doing so."

"Have they developed any lines of enquiry?"

"No, but they still want to speak to Seiryō." Takeru frowned. "I'm torn over that, Ayeka. Part of me feels that he should face up to his past actions and deal with it like a man — take responsibility for his mistakes, if they're going to cause Jurai problems. But then..."

He sighed.

"The other part of me has respect for Lady Kaede, and wants an end to the rivalry." He admitted. "That it's become more a case of me feeling inferior to him, rather than the other way around. Since he returned to Jurai, I've noticed it, little by little. He's no longer competing with me — or even, really, acknowledging that I exist more than he has to. He'll deal with me when the necessity arises — but I find in myself elements of petty envy when it comes to how easily he's regained position at court. Is that stupid, Ayeka-chan? To feel that way about someone like that?"

"Perhaps." Ayeka looked rueful. "But if I said I'd never felt like it, I'd be lying."

"Ayeka?" Takeru eyed her in surprise, and Ayeka shrugged.

"When I was on the Earth, with Ryoko." She murmured. "Over... Tenchi."

"Oh." Takeru pursed his lips, and Ayeka touched him gently on the cheek.

"I don't feel that way now, however." She added. "You should know that. I've let go — if I hadn't, we wouldn't be in the position we are now. You do know that, don't you?"

"I suppose so." Despite himself, Takeru smiled. "So what's your advice, then, where Seiryō and I are concerned?"

"Like you said, he's not acted on his feelings of rivalry towards you since you fought on the Earth, when he was under Tokimi's spell." Ayeka said thoughtfully. "I think he has his own agenda now, Takeru."

I don't pretend to understand it, or know if I like him any more than I did before. I know Sasami's extremely fond of him. Yet some nobles would have used that connection to push to become her consort — and Seiryō's done nothing of the sort. He's become her friend and her advisor without seeking to exploit their working relationship for his own interests... I think I've begun to respect him for that."

"He told me once that there was nothing the crown of Jurai could give him that he did not already have." Takeru mused. "Perhaps that's true. And I do... I have sympathy for him also, to be honest with you. That he'd be kept away from court so long — when his father died, he did nothing of the sort. As boys, I thought he tried to emulate Lord Seiji — yet he showed no apparent hesitation to return to work right away. And Kaede-sama... I sympathise with the loss, too. She was a good woman, and for her sake, I'd like to bury the hatchet with her son."

"We still don't know the circumstances of Seiji-sama's death." Ayeka reflected, and Takeru shrugged.

"The Emperor has closed the case. We can't do anything about it." He said evenly. "And you shouldn't be worrying about these things. You're scaring me, with this sudden ill health of yours — it's working too hard, that's what it is."

"Well, it won't be happening much more." Ayeka raised her gaze to his, suddenly serious, and Takeru frowned.

"What does that mean? Ayeka, I know that look — something's wrong?"

"No. Nothing is." Ayeka shook her head. "Just that I have... decided to put Jurai's future before Jurai's present for a little while."

She slipped her hand into his, squeezing it tightly.

"Takeru-kun, we are blessed." She said softly, and at the shining look in her eyes, Takeru's heart skipped a beat.

"Ayeka..?"

The Princess nodded.

"Sasami says it will be a son." She whispered. "But that... that I have to take care of myself, because he will be born with Jurai's power. A true heir, Takeru... we are blessed."

"Ayeka-chan." Emotion welled up inside the Prince Consort as he hugged his wife tightly, running his fingers through her thick, silky hair. "Of all the things I thought you came to tell me, that was the

furthest from my mind. It's true, though? There are no doubts?"

"No doubts at all." Ayeka raised her gaze to his, shaking her head. "But I'm going to do as Sasami says, and withdraw from the Council and other politics until it is past. And Takeru, I need your help in this, too. Sasami wants to be a part of things — and the way she was talking, I think she ought to be, too. Father and Uncle seem to want to protect her, when Seiryō's not around to deflect any damage, and she's fed up with it. I'm going to speak to them, when I tell them this news tomorrow morning. But I want you to back her up in any way you can. She's not as much a child as people think she is, and one day... one day we'll both rely on her a lot more than we do now. And so will... our son."

Takeru gazed at her for a moment, then he nodded his head.

"If that's how you feel, you know you can count on me." He said, his voice low with emotion. "And now I feel twice as much sympathy for Seiryō as I did before."

"Why so?" Ayeka looked surprised.

"Here I am, celebrating a new life with my wife... a wife who, perhaps, at long last has begun to love me." Takeru said gently. "And he's burying his mother. He's a solitary soul, Ayeka. He's alone, in a lot of ways. And I... I suppose I am blessed. More than I realised I was. You've put things back into perspective for me... thank you."

"You're welcome." Ayeka murmured. "I'm glad I can count on you, Takeru."

"Of course." Takeru nodded. "And now I know that, I'm twice as determined that we're going to find out who's behind all this and what's going on. No harm is going to come to you, Ayeka-chan... I promise you that. To you *or* to our baby. If Sasami thinks she can help — I know what power she has, and what wisdom Tsunami possesses. I think it better that she's involved than Seiryō, given that... Jurai's protection has to come first in this, above the Galaxy Police and their demands."

"Indeed." Ayeka agreed. "And... and also the Earth, Takeru-kun. Even if I... I've let go of my feelings for Tenchi now, they are still my friends. And I still... want things to be all right there, too."

"I'm sure, if we can cut this off at its Jurai source, we can soon pacify the Earth if need be." Takeru said reassuringly. "Don't worry, Ayeka. I'm sure Tenchi-sama and Ryoko-san will be just fine."

"I hope you're right." Ayeka bit her lip. "And I hope the Galaxy

Police can figure something out. It's too risky to try and send a message to Tenchi or anyone on the Earth — so we'll just have to put faith in Imaguchi and his partner and hope for the best."

She sighed, spreading her hands.

"Maybe it's because of the baby, but it makes me very on edge." She admitted. "So many people are working towards the same end, but the enemy is still unknown. All this endeavour... I just hope that it's going to be enough!"

---

Well, so far it was interesting.

Washu chewed down absently on her thumbnail as she scanned her gaze across the screen of data that scrolled before her, her green eyes becoming thoughtful as she digested the information.

"More and more I'm thinking Ryoko's *not* being paranoid in the least." She reflected with a sigh. "It's been a while since I came and directly supervised events here — who authorised the introduction of such sophisticated shields, anyway? And who commanded their installation on these coordinates? It's close to insanity — at this distance, they'll only radiate any attacks back towards the planet's surface — yet noone thought to ask my opinion on this? It'll take a month or two at best to re-align these into a more suitable arrangement. Still, at least I came, and was able to point out the severe flaws... maybe it won't be a lost cause, if work begins again immediately. More expense, of course, but then they shouldn't have been so idiotic to begin with."

She sat back in her seat with a sigh, contemplating her decision to attend the International Space Consortium's agenda meeting that morning.

"If Ryoko hadn't been so keen on tracking down what this Kane kid is involved in, and I hadn't taken her seriously, this might've escaped my notice." She mused. "What confuses me is that noone's changed the coordinates on the system in my original advisory report. It's not an attempt to frame me for bad information. Can they really be such idiots on this planet that they'd misjudge by such a huge distance? Or is this all connected to whatever it is that Ryoko's worried about? But that doesn't make any sense. *I'm* the alien involved in this project. If they were really concerned about alien life on the Earth, wouldn't it be a perfect opportunity to make me look bad? But that hasn't happened..."



She sighed, rubbing her temples.

“I’m confused.” She reflected. “I need more data. Maybe I should bug Tenchi — although knowing my luck if I did that, I’d get more than I bargained for. Still... there’s something major not connecting up here. They increase Earth’s defensive potential, but do so in a flawed way... the Earth are worried about invasion... but they’re also inviting it by placing their shields in this position? What’s that about? Are they trying to protect the Earth or cause it harm? What are they trying to do? And more importantly — *who*?”

She got to her feet, her computer dissolving into nothing as she twisted her fingers together, pacing across the office to the small, square window that looked down across the rest of the Imperial Space Consortium’s extensive Tokyo complex. By intergalactic standards it was both small and basic, but the endeavour of the people there had appealed to Washu’s sense of science, and she had so far enjoyed sharing her expertise with a generally more than willing audience.

And yet, today she felt uneasy.

“Like I’m somehow under surveillance.” She reflected. “But I know it’s just my imagination. I’ve scanned this room for all devices, and the Earth are too primitive to go beyond basic espionage. It’s just paranoia... but for the first time since I began working in an advisory capacity like this, I feel like I’m separate from everyone else. Is that the intention of all of this? To make anyone of alien birth feel so isolated they choose to leave of their own free will? But even that... is that even a tactic?”

She clenched her fists, bringing them down hard on her desk.

“It’s so frustrating!” She exclaimed. “I’m missing something major, and I just can’t get my head around it!”

“Hakubi-sensei?”

A knock at the door brought her back to the present and she turned, taking a deep breath as she calmed herself, reordering her features into a warm, nonchalant smile.

“Come in.” She called. “I’m here, and I’m not busy.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” The door swung back to reveal a man in a suit, and Washu frowned, glancing at him without comprehension.

“Ishida-san?” She murmured. “Of all people, I didn’t expect to see *you* knocking on my office door. I thought you had far more important things to do than come watch us dabble in scientific premise — or am

I wrong in thinking that your company have just sealed a lucrative deal that might yet make you a good profit on the intergalactic market?”

“It’s something that’s been in the works.” At her words Ishida seemed taken aback, then he grinned, nodding his head. “You keep abreast of business affairs then, too, Professor? As well as your interest in the defense of our planet?”

“Of course.” Washu nodded, offering him a wry smile. “I live here, Ishida-kun. I don’t just put myself in the cupboard at night and switch off the light. It’s impossible to exist on the Earth without absorbing some of the day to day events and current affairs.”

She shrugged.

“Besides, I quite enjoy reading the Asahi Shinbun in the morning, with my breakfast.”

“That sounds so normal and everyday.” Ishida laughed. “So you are settled on the Earth now, then? You have no plans to return to your own planet?”

“There’s no planet to return to.” Washu said evenly, but something about his innocent question put her on her guard. “And Earth’s authorities have always been kind to a lost stray like myself. Yes, Ishida-san. I think I’d like to live out my days here on the Earth. It’s the sort of planet that feels like home — the first one that has, really, since my own world was destroyed.”

Ishida eyed her keenly for a moment, and again Washu had that sense of being under particular scrutiny. She offered him a smile, gesturing to an empty seat as she perched on the narrow windowsill, kicking her legs idly against the white-washed walls as she watched him do as he was bidden.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company today?” She asked softly. “Is this a business meeting, or just a social hello? Because if it’s the former, I’m flattered but much too busy to take on more than I already have. And if it’s the latter... I can’t think what I’ve done to deserve such particular attention from such a celebrated entrepreneur.”

“You have a way with words, Hakubi-sensei.” Ishida acknowledged ruefully. “But it’s neither and both at the same time. You have been directly involved in Earth’s defensive project for some time now, haven’t you?”

“Yes, although I think you realise that elements of that are top

secret.” Washu said evenly. “Even to major financial investors like yourself... I would be betraying the terms that brought me here, if I were to divulge any of the technical details to someone not on the developmental team.”

“Yes, I know, and I wasn’t going to ask you to break your silence.” Ishida shook his head. “It just seems like a while since you’ve been here... I wondered whether you’d moved on to other things.”

Washu’s expression became impassive, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“My younger sister has been unwell.” She said softly. “When my world was destroyed, she suffered a serious mental injury, and she’s considerably impaired. Recently, she underwent an unpleasant experience which upset her quite badly. In her delicate state, I felt it better that I be with her... until things had evened themselves out.”

“I see.” Ishida frowned. “I’m sorry. I hope that she’s feeling better now.”

“Tokimi is an optimistic soul, and she lives with her weaknesses quite well, most days.” Washu nodded. “She is, thank you for asking. And I have shamefully neglected my work here, so I am trying my best to rectify that. A lot has happened in my absence — I’m still trying to catch up on all the latest brief notes and technical reports.”

Ishida was silent for a moment, and Washu eyed him keenly, deciding that he was building up to something more than simply small talk about her sister.

“Something is troubling you, Ishida-san?” She asked gently. “You seem preoccupied... I can’t understand why one in your position has anything to be worried about.”

“I am worried.” Ishida admitted. “And I admit, I did come to see you for a specific reason. Washu-sensei, I hope you’ll forgive my prying... but your planet... was called Kihaku, wasn’t it?”

“This isn’t a secret.” Washu was immediately on her guard, nodding her head. “Yes. It was.”

“And it was destroyed... a year ago?”

“About eighteen months.” Washu inclined her head. “Why? I appreciate your concern, but there’s not much that even I can do to glue back together a shattered homeworld.”

“It must have been distressing.”

“Destruction of the past always is, Ishida-kun.” Washu spread her hands. “But we live and we move on. We have to. Thankfully for me, the Earth has opened its doors and made me welcome. And I’m doing what I can to repay that kindness — this world has become a second home to me, and it helps to put Kihaku’s tragedy behind me.”

She tilted her head, shooting him a pensive look.

“If I may ask, why the sudden interest in my planet?”

Ishida sighed, and for an instant, Washu thought he looked older than his years. Then he nodded.

“As a settler on this planet, you must be aware that there are people who don’t view the presence of alien life here as something natural or desirable.” He said at length. “That there are, in some quarters, elements looking to stifle it completely... to find a way to force settlers like yourself to leave.”

“Yes, of course.” Washu nodded. “It’s only natural for the native people to feel that way... I understand that it’s frightening to be suddenly so small in such a big galaxy. But I don’t let it bother me. I live my life... and people have been good to me. I’ve nothing to complain of... as I told you, I’ve grown fond of the Earth.”

“In my business research, I’ve come to learn a little bit about the planet Jurai — the one that has been most publically associated with Earth in the past year or so.” Ishida hazarded. “You are familiar with that planet too?”

“Very much so.” Washu agreed. “How could anyone not be? Jurai are the single most powerful imperial power in deep space. To have them as an ally is powerful protection for a planet like Earth — no one would dare invoke the wrath of the Emperor Azusa if they could possibly avoid it.”

“All right.” Ishida sighed. “I’ll be straight with you, Washu-sensei. Even though you were born on another planet from this one, you’ve put yourself out for the Earth’s benefit since you’ve been here, and I’m sure there are others like you — others whose integration into society here is hampered by the fear of the native population.”

“As I said, I’ve no complaints.”

“No, but this alliance with Jurai... complicates a lot of things.” Ishida admitted. “I won’t pretend that, having begun to delve into business matters, I’ve not discovered a few other things about them and their methods. And... they concern me. That a force so powerful...”

He faltered, then,

“In your educated opinion, as someone who knows of Jurai’s ways, do you feel that they are a threat to the Earth in any way?”

“A threat? I see.” Washu’s eyes narrowed. “I suppose that depends on how much the Earth causes them trouble. But I don’t imagine so. Not in the imminent future. Why?”

“Well, considering how much technology of theirs now protects this world, and how tied in we’ve become...” Ishida hesitated, then, “Washu-sensei, Jurai were the planet who invaded and destroyed your world, weren’t they? Don’t you fear them repeating the exercise here? The more my business has taken me into this, the more I’ve heard stories about their conquering exploits. And I begin to fear for the Earth too. That there are many things that have happened that most of the population don’t know about. And that this planet is shielding — and trusting — those who have criminal convictions for mass destruction in the past.”

Washu pursed her lips, eying him for a moment as she debated how best to answer him. Then she sighed, nodding.

“Kihaku was a Juraian colony.” She agreed. “But it was a long time ago. A very long time, Ishida-san. Believe me. Jurai are not the blood-thirsty, conquering force they used to be, once upon a time. And now they have Tsunami’s influence, I doubt they will be again. Lady Sasami is well known for her peaceful nature and her live and let live attitude to the universe. Most of all, she has a special interest in planet Earth’s continuing safety. I understand your fears, but I think you can put your mind at rest. I don’t think that Jurai would invade here.”

She smiled slightly.

“If it makes more sense on a business level, there aren’t any resources here on Earth that would attract such an expensive mission.” She added. “It wouldn’t be to their advantage.”

“I suppose there’s a lot we don’t understand, yet.” Ishida said frankly. “And maybe, because of your line of work, things you haven’t become aware of, either. Washu-sensei, I know you’re a scientist... but are you familiar with the Galaxy Police? Have your paths crossed before?”

“Of course.” Washu looked confused, though inwardly her brain was working double-time as she struggled to piece the parts of the puzzle together. “It would be impossible not to have encountered them — they patrol all across space and protect people in all sectors.

Even this one.”

“What about a man called Seiryō Tennan?”

“Ishida-san, is this a casual conversation, or an interrogation?” Washu asked softly. “Do you consider *me* dangerous to the Earth, even after all you’ve said?”

“No, not at all.” Ishida held up his hands. “I’m sorry to have given that impression. Truly, I have no fear of you or your intentions... please, don’t misinterpret me. Just, a disturbing report reached me by way of a business associate, regarding an agent of the Galaxy Police who launched an attack on the Earth — on the city I call home. A man who is involved in Juraian government — you must understand how such a thing appears to an objective eye.”

“Yes.” Washu’s expression became grave. “I understand completely. But I was under the impression that, on account of his actions, the agent in question was removed from the Galaxy Police? Surely he no longer poses the Earth a threat?”

“It would seem so, yes.” Ishida agreed heavily. “I’m sorry to be dancing around such controversial topics with you, also. It must seem very odd that I’ve chosen now to voice them, when we’ve been little more than vague colleagues for a year. But I do believe Earth can trust you, if we can trust anyone from outside this world. And I’m concerned that this Tennan man seems to be significant in Jurai’s powerbase. That the attack may not have been on Galaxy Police orders, but on Juraian ones. As a precursor for invasion. And many of the population still aren’t aware... of everything that I’ve learnt since I began expanding my business into more intergalactic interests.”

“I think it unlikely Seiryō Tennan will bother invading the Earth. He’s far too arrogant a man to bother with a planet that most Juraians probably haven’t even heard of.” Washu said ironically. “I would have thought, whatever his reasons the last time, he wouldn’t care to return. As I said, there’s no prestige or resources to be gained from invading Earth. And such people don’t see this world the way you and I do, Ishida-kun. To me, it’s a haven. To you, it’s home. To them, it’s not worth the money to subjugate. Juraian pride is a fierce thing, and it shouldn’t be underestimated.”

“And what about the other factor? The space criminal known as Ryoko?” Ishida asked softly, and Washu stared up at him.

“Ryoko?” She echoed.

“The so called Liason between Earth and Jurai.” Ishida nodded his

head. "I've learnt that she was once an infamous space pirate, destroying and looting her way across space for the fun of it."

He looked rueful.

"You and she share names, and I had thought at one point that you might be related, but I believe the girl is also Juraian in origin." He added. "So it must be a coincidence of space."

"The universe is large, so such things are possible." Washu said vaguely. "I can't tell you anything about space pirates, Ishida-san. The Galaxy Police, yes. Jurai, somewhat. But I'm a law abiding citizen... I don't take interest in the intergalactic underworld."

She shivered.

"To be honest, such things are a mite frightening, even to a genius scientist like myself." She added innocently.

"Then you can understand my stance?" Ishida hazarded. "I don't want to cause trouble for innocent people like yourself. But I also don't want anything to happen to my planet, either. It's a delicate line to walk."

"Indeed it is." Washu nodded, hesitating for a moment, then making up her mind. "And I do understand your line of thought. Earth is home to me too now, Ishida-san."

She held out her hand, offering him a smile.

"And you can count on me." She added, as he accepted her gesture, a flicker of relief in his dark eyes.

"If you need my help, you have it. My loyalties are with this world, and I'll protect it with everything I have. You have my word."

## Chapter 12

---

### Chapter Twelve

“So, what did Jurai have to say for themselves?”

Agent Ryousuke Takamura of the Galaxy Police Elite Division slid back the door of his colleague’s work quarters, casting him a quizzical look as he set down his pile of data disks on the already cluttered desk. “Anything more helpful than we already have, or are we still up against a brick wall?”

“A little bit of both.” His companion, Agent Hideki Imaguchi turned from his screen, sending his partner a rueful grin. “Come in, Ryou... you might as well add your brain to the chaos of mine. I spoke to Lord Takeru — and he was able to tell me at the very least that they think their spy was from Kanemitsu. My suspicions are that he’s probably an extremist sympathiser — Kanemitsu have never been the most docile of Juraian outposts and since the Sumire incident, negotiations seem to have gone dead on that front. Imada-sama’s forwarded the forensic report and I’ve read it over — but I’d like you to take a look at it, too. You’re the one with the medical qualifications, after all — like as not you might find something I’ve missed.”

With pleasure. “Takamura nodded his head, coming to sit down.” But I doubt that, if the suspect is as you say, we’ll learn much from that connection. Kanemitsu extremists want to hurt Jurai — well, that’s nothing new, is it? And now he’s dead, we won’t get to find out who paid him to act. I thought Jurai’s security were more vigilant than that... but I guess we all have our weak points.”

“Too true.” Imaguchi acknowledged. “But right now it’s all we’ve got. That and the psychological report on the Tokimi girl. I’ve read that too — I think we can rule her out of anything. Even despite the frequent references to her activities in that hearing report, it seems pretty certain that the girl’s mental impairments are severe. I watched the film and went over the write up with a fine tooth comb... having done so, I find it hard to attribute so much destruction to her, to be honest. She’s like a child — and we can dismiss her as a suspect this time around.”

“Well, I suppose that’s progress.” Takamura said frankly. “But even so, they’re not giving us much to work with, either? Did you mention the possibility of seeing Seiryō?”



“Hah.” Imaguchi snorted. “Apparently he’s misplaced his spine since he went back to Jurai — either that or they’re not quite trusting him as much as they seem to be, and they’re keeping him on a short leash. Takeru-sama was very clear on that subject — that we’d have to apply to the Emperor and we might as well not bother. They don’t want him speaking to us.”

“Maybe it’s simply because of his mother’s death.” Takamura suggested, and Imaguchi arched an eyebrow.

“We *are* talking about Seiryō Tennan.” He said softly. “Do you really think that’s the case?”

“Hard to know.” His companion acknowledged. “I always got the impression that if he had a soft spot for anything, it was his family — his mother and his sister, anyway.”

“Either way, it doesn’t help us.” Imaguchi sighed. “So far we’ve got a big problem. We have the hearing report that this spy died to leak... but we can’t speak to anyone who was involved. Or at least, the ones we can... we’ve been told the things they want us to know. Lord Azusa, Lord Haru — they keep their cards as close to their chests as you might expect from any Juraian lord. I asked Takeru-sama straight what his impressions were, but all I got from him was that when he encountered Seiryō on Earth, the man was not in his wits. Which I think, knowing him as we do, we’d both assumed. Professor Hakubi’s last recorded whereabouts were planet Earth — which we cannot go to without creating suspicion from the people we’re investigating. Not when we suspect it’s one — or many — of our own. And the droid... Yume... Zero... who knows what’s become of her. Scrap metal, as far as I’m concerned. I did hope we might get something from the horse’s mouth — I can’t help but think Seiryō was very tight-lipped during the whole proceeding.”

“Even if that’s true, he’s disassociated from the Elite now.” Takamura said evenly. “Hideki, I know you like to root out secrets and see if you can’t use them to your better advantage. However...”

“However, you think my focus is wrong?” Imaguchi eyed his partner quizzically, and Takamura shrugged his shoulders.

“No.” He admitted. “But the truth is, I don’t think the real enemy is on Jurai — at least, this case is awkward for us, but it’s more awkward if it becomes a matter for tribunal. Seiryō *did* commit crimes against a protected sector of space, for which he should have been formally charged and arraigned. But Jurai seem to have impeded this process, and that *could* be seen as an interference in justice. Many

planets have grievances against Jurai and the Galaxy Police — if people think there's been a cover-up..."

He sighed.

"And what about us? Are we helping to defend the law or to break it ourselves?" He asked helplessly. "The Earth's involvement is problematic. Now there's a planet with witnesses who can come forward and testify against Seiryō if the matter came to trial. And that Seiryō is now so tied up in Juraian politics — it would be seen as a potential act of aggression towards a planet with official primitive life protection. If you consider that Jurai have accepted Seiryō back and given him high office, and yet he's done these things which put him open to criticism — it looks very much like Jurai at best don't care about the Earth. At worst... they're looking to divide and conquer."

"You think a war is brewing, don't you?" Imaguchi asked softly, and his companion pursed his lips, gesturing to the pile of disks.

"Everything I could find on past cases of serious space law breaching." He said softly. "In most cases, justice meant imprisonment or exile. In a few, execution. In all cases, those who betrayed the badge had their lives broken down from underneath them. When you go back to the insurrection led by Prince Kagato, you have the last major abuse of Galaxy Police resources by one particular planetary authority. Following that... you know as well as I do that we suffered... that the Force lost many men and women tainted by the conspiracy, and that a lot of rebuilding and restructuring had to be done in order to regain the universe's trust. I don't want this to appear to be a similar situation. That to an outsider's eye, Seiryō was an Elite and is now the agent of the Lady Sasami, the Princess said to be blessed with a Goddess's power. Kagato thought himself a God, and acted on those delusions. I have no idea whether Sasami-sama is truly the reborn Goddess or if she is just a powerful young Princess with elevated Jurai power. But these things are a matter of faith as much as anything else. My family are from Yubisu, remember. I know from our Juraian ties how strong the belief is where Tsunami-kami-sama is concerned. Can you imagine how intimidated other planetary bodies must be feeling? Especially as, for the first time in space history, Jurai has allied itself with both Seniwa *and* Airai? If ever they were in a powerful position to take control of anything and everything, this would be it."

"Which side of the fence are you on, then, Ryou?" Imaguchi eyed him keenly, and his companion smiled ruefully.

"Yours, as ever." He said frankly. "I'm not talking about my beliefs.

I'm quite sure in my own mind that no matter how much of an arrogant fool Seiryō Tennen can be, this is all being blown out of proportion. But if we're to prove that to intergalactic satisfaction, we need more information. We need more proof. And we just don't have it."

"There's one other thing concerning me." Imaguchi admitted. "And that's the fact that the leak didn't begin with Jurai. It began here... within the Galaxy Police."

"Within the Elite division." Takamura agreed. "At least, so it would seem."

"Since Tsunetomo-san's death, there hasn't been an agent quite as good at manipulating data and computer surveillance as he was." Imaguchi reflected. "But that doesn't mean there aren't agents within the division who have high level skills. And... reasons to align themselves against Seiryō Tennen."

Takamura's eyes narrowed.

"Junichi Nakabito." He murmured. "That's who you mean, isn't it? You think Nakabito is the leak."

"I think that if he isn't, he's become extremely lax of late." Imaguchi said forthrightedly. "Because if anyone should have pinned this down at source so far, it should have been him. Especially considering he is of Kanemitsu extraction himself — doesn't he have his finger on the pulse? Or if not, why is he considered the division's expert in surveillance espionage? If he can't spot a spy within the Elite, what use is he out in the field?"

"But we have no proof." Takamura sighed. "And we're back to that again. Nothing can be done without proof — and saying that Seiryō and Nakabito hated one another when they were teenagers seems feeble. Dammit... I wish Jurai weren't so fussy! Unless he's said he doesn't want to speak to us, of course... but even so..."

"I got the impression that he knows nothing about it." Imaguchi grimaced. "Therein lies the frustration. Jurai seem to operate on a need-to-know basis. And if you don't need to know, believe me, you don't."

"Lord Haru is sly as a fox in that regard." Takamura agreed. "In the meantime... short of alerting everyone's suspicions by placing an official request to spy on Nakabito — without a scrap of evidence to support why we want to invade his personal space — what the hell can we do? We can't go the Earth. We can't get any more out of Jurai."

And we have nothing else to go on. Can we really risk filing this case and leaving it be?"

"I think if we do that, a lot of people might die." Imaguchi said darkly. "I'm firmly of the belief that this is some kind of plot to bring Jurai into disrepute. Maybe even a Kanemitsu plot — with my experience in investigating their terrorist activities, they're crazy enough to try it, especially if they have got Nakabito involved at this end of proceedings."

He grimaced.

"And I'm also sure that this Earth are being used as a sacrifice to achieve that end." He added. "I'm certain that, foolish though they might be, it's our duty to protect them, because they don't know the risks they're stumbling into. Investigating Seiryō's misdemeanours is one thing, but I'm certain it's bigger than what he's done in the past. I'm of the opinion that this past evidence is going to be used to stitch up him — and therefore his noble patrons — for anything about to come in the future. And if underground Kanemitsu rebels are involved in things, it must be of some significance. I don't for one minute think that any of their extremists are savvy enough to go to such wild lengths on their own."

"I'm getting a headache." Takamura groaned. "I hate feeling helpless."

His companion opened his mouth to reply, but before he could do so, there was a knock on the door and the two agents faltered, exchanging confused looks.

"Expecting someone?" Takamura asked, and Imaguchi shook his head, reaching across to switch off his digital screen as he flipped back the door switch to unlock it.

"Not at all." He admitted, as with a hiss the divide slid back to reveal a young woman, dressed in the attire of a regular division Detective, her dark hair braided back from her face and a look of determined resolution in her sapphire blue eyes. At the sight of her, Imaguchi's eyes widened, and he shook his head slowly, not quite able to believe what he was seeing.

"I'm sorry to disturb you both." The girl broke the silence, speaking in low, composed tones. "But I think I need to speak to you. And... it's quite important."

"Detective Makibi." Takamura shot his partner a glance, then eyed the Detective keenly. "What can we do for you?"

“You know my name?” The young woman seemed taken aback, and Imaguchi nodded his head, an ironic smile on his lips as he beckoned for her to come in. She did so, glancing around her at the untidy office as he closed the door behind her.

“Yes. We do.” He agreed evenly. “And since you’ve come looking for us specifically, I imagine you must know ours, as well. I have to admit, we’re neither one of us used to entertaining Regular division officers at short notice — I apologise for the mess and chaos you’ve just stepped into.”

“Believe me, compared to my partner’s quarters, it’s nothing unusual.” The woman smiled, and a little of the intensity left her vivid blue eyes. “I’m sorry for dropping on you unexpectedly. It was a last minute decision to come here this evening. I’m here because I think you’re friends of Seiryō Tennan. And it’s that I want to talk to you about.”

“Seiryō.” Takamura murmured, and Imaguchi’s eyes narrowed as he struggled to read the girl’s motives. Her face was familiar to them both, from the hearing footage they had both watched in minute detail. But the expression on her face was not, and it was impossible for him to tell what she was thinking.

“Sit down, then.” He said at length, gesturing to a free chair, and the woman did as she was bidden, folding her hands in her lap as she gazed between them. Takamura offered her a smile.

“I’m Ryōsuke Takamura, and my colleague is Hideki Imaguchi.” He said softly, and the girl nodded.

“I know.” She said evenly. “I assumed that — after all, this is Agent Imaguchi’s workspace, and so I took it for granted that it was Agent Imaguchi who apologised for the mess.”

Imaguchi’s eyes widened slightly, and the woman smiled.

“I’m a Regular Division Detective. I’m not a simpleton.” She said softly. “We have brains too, you know... and I’m hoping to be of some help to you, so I want you to know that from the beginning. I’m here on the advice of Lord Kuramitsu... he recommended to me that you were people I could trust, and that you were... once friends of Seiryō’s. I hope he was right — because it’s hard to know who I should be trusting.”

“Kuramitsu-sensei.” Takamura looked startled. “I don’t understand — what has he to do with anything?”

“I went to ask his advice.” The Detective said evenly. “My partner

Mihoshi is his eldest child... so I'm well acquainted with the family, and he's someone I have faith in to be straight with me."

She shrugged.

"I'll cut to the chase, because I imagine neither you nor I have a lot of time to waste on unnecessary pleasantries." She added. "Are you truly Seiryō's friends?"

"As much as anyone is, I imagine so." Imaguchi gathered himself, nodding his head. "Although I find it confusing, Detective Makibi, that you're here concerned with something like that. What interest can you possibly have in Seiryō Tennan? You're a Regular Division Detective, as you rightly pointed out. And Seiryō... Lord Tennan is no longer a member of the Galaxy Police Elite."

"I know that." Vague impatience laced the woman's tones. "I was with him on Jurai a few days ago — I already told you, I'm not stupid. I know people are spying on him, and I know you went to Jurai, too. Lord Kuramitsu seemed to think I could trust in your honesty — that you'd be acting in Seiryō's interests, not against him. So I've come here to help, if I possibly can."

Takamura's eyes narrowed, and he pursed his lips.

"Why would a Detective whose life was threatened and almost ended by a former Galaxy Police Agent such as Seiryō Tennan wish to act in his interests?" He asked softly.

"Because we're friends."

"We have video footage that begs to differ." Imaguchi said briefly. "You gave testimony against Seiryō at a Juraian hearing, and we have in our custody digital recordings of that event. Your attitude seems a little different now to what it was then... we're not fools either, Detective. You're going to have to be more clear with us than that."

"Then that's how you know my name." Kiyone's expression cleared, and she nodded her head. "I'm not denying that you're right — I did do as you say. I was terrified of the man — and I did what I believed was the right thing to do at the time."

"And now?"

"Seiryō and I were both victims of dark magic." Kiyone met their gazes earnestly with an open, honest one of her own. "If you really are his friends in any capacity, you'll know as well as me that sneaking around in the shadows marking someone for death is not his style. It's not the man he is. I've seen him lose his temper and draw his sword,

but only to defend those he loves. And when he attacked me, he was under a spell — a spell which had long-lasting, far-reaching consequences for the both of us. Besides...”

She sighed, biting her lip.

“Besides, his mother just died.” She added softly. “And I’ve never seen him so broken up about anything. I know he’s at risk from whatever it is that’s going on behind the scenes, and I think you want to help prevent that from happening, just like I do. He did a bad thing, I won’t deny it. Several bad things, and if you’ve seen the hearing, you know all about them. But he’s not a bad man. He was misled, and he suffered for it — more than a Galaxy Police Tribunal or the Emperor of Jurai could inflict in terms of punishment. I don’t... I don’t want him to suffer any more. That’s all.”

She raised her gaze.

“I want to be involved.” She added, and Imaguchi sighed.

“Even if you’re right, we can’t put a Regular Division Detective at risk in a dangerous Elite operation.” He said with a little shake of his head. “You don’t have the training, and...”

“I have more than you might think. I’ve trained as an Elite, I’ve just never obtained the promotion.” Kiyone cut across him, determination in her expression. “Besides, I gave Sasami my word that I’d do what I could for Jurai. And for the Earth. She was worried... about them, about Seiryō — and so am I. I have friends on both worlds, and I don’t like the way it looks. It seems to me like someone wants to make it look like Jurai wants to hurt the Earth — and I’m an officer of the Galaxy Police. When I took my badge, I swore to uphold justice in the universe. So that’s what I mean to do!”

“Wait a minute.” Takamura held up his hands. “Did you say... Sasami? *Lady* Sasami? The Princess of Jurai?”

“Yes.” Kiyone agreed.

“*She*... sent you?”

“Not exactly, but I’m here with her blessing.” Kiyone said evenly.

Takamura exchanged glances with his partner, then he frowned.

“How does a Regular Division Detective form such connections?” He asked softly.

“By helping to restore both Princess Ayeka and Princess Sasami during Kagato’s revolt.” Kiyone said evenly. “But if you’re Agents

worth your salt, you'll background check me and find that for yourself. I told you, I have friends on both Earth and Jurai. And Sasami and Seiryō both need me to do this. After all, it could rebound back on both of them, and neither one deserves it."

Imaguchi stared at her for a moment. Then a faint smile touched his lips.

"Ryou, I think we might have just found the source we were looking for." He said softly.

"But..." Takamura looked startled, and Imaguchi shrugged his shoulders.

"It will be dangerous." He reflected evenly. "But I imagine you know that, Detective."

"My name is Kiyone." Kiyone said frankly. "And yes. I know. I'm not afraid."

"And you really want to help us, in all regards?"

"If I can. Yes. If it means that whoever wants to stir up trouble is stopped." Kiyone agreed. "I wanted to see you as soon as I could, because I have a feeling things are already moving. Sasami warned me that I might become involved against my will because of my testimony, and tomorrow I've been summoned to speak to your colleague, Junichi Nakabito. I knew nothing about the man... so I went to Mitsuru-sama and asked him his opinion. Now I'm asking yours. Can I trust this man?"

"Nakabito, huh?" Imaguchi's eyes narrowed, and Kiyone's expression flickered with comprehension.

"You're not sure I can, but you can't prove otherwise. Just like Mitsuru-sama said." She murmured. "He said that Nakabito was a fine, diligent agent, but that he hated Seiryō with a deep-rooted passion and that he had a failing for holding grudges. And you... you think he is involved, but you don't know how to formalise those suspicions into a justified accusation."

Takamura blinked.

"Are you *sure* you're not an Elite?" He asked ruefully. "You sure as hell sound like one, talking like that."

"I told you, I've done training." Kiyone said vaguely, dismissing it with her hand. "But any Detective who cares about her work pays close attention to things... even things that aren't said. Right?"



“Very true.” Imaguchi grinned at her. “And if you come with Kuramitsu-sensei’s seal of approval, I suppose we must trust in your ability, also.”

“Then tomorrow, I will meet with Junichi Nakabito.” Kiyone said decidedly. “And I’ll see what I can find out. Then I’ll report back to you.”

“Be careful.” Takamura told her. “Nakabito is not stupid. He’s also an expert in spotting spies and catching people in deception. He’s not your average dumb crook.”

“Lord Kuramitsu said the same thing.” Kiyone admitted. “But it’s all right. I’ll just see what he wants... that’s all.”

“Perhaps you should wear a wire.” Imaguchi murmured reflectively, but Takamura shook his head.

“The risk is too great.” He said frankly. “No. But it just occurred to me... that if our Juraian spy was leaking information to someone here, and that someone was Nakabito, he might well know about her testimony against Seiryō. In which case, he might look to her as an ally, not as a potential foe. In which case...”

“In which case, I’ll do what I can to obtain his trust.” Kiyone said resolutely. “And then, if he is the one trying to cause trouble, I’ll do my bit to make sure he’s stopped before anyone gets hurt!”

“You’ve been in Osaka a lot of late, you know.”

As Sakura slipped into the booth opposite her alien friend, she rested her chin in her hands, eying the other girl thoughtfully. “I thought that us graduating would mean I’d see less of you — but with this wedding thing, I think I’m seeing more. You even start to look like a stressed out bride to be, Ryoko — it’s sort of weird, if you want to know the truth.”

“I wish the wedding was all I was planning.” Ryoko sighed. “Right now I’ve got a lot of things on my mind. I suppose I came here because it’s easier than doing nothing at all, and I don’t want to attract attention. You and I are friends these days, and it’s not unusual for me to hang out with you, is it?”

“No, it’s not.” Sakura looked confused. “But I don’t understand. Why does that matter?”

Ryoko grimaced.

“I don’t know how much to tell you.” She admitted. “Since at the moment, Tenchi doesn’t know anything about it, either. And it’s probably better that way.”

“Has this got something to do with Kyoda?” Sakura asked softly. Ryoko looked startled.

“How did you...?”

“I saw Tenchi with him in the city the other day.” Sakura shrugged. “I thought the only place they’d be burying hatchets would be in each other’s head, but I guess I misjudged... they seemed quite friendly, to me.”

She looked rueful.

“Mind you, I also thought it impossible Hiroshi could get the attention of a girl like that Mayume, and he’s not even answering his cell this week.” She added. “So I guess my judgement’s pretty shot.”

“I don’t trust Kyoda, that’s all.” Ryoko admitted. “I think he’s being friendly to Tenchi for other reasons... because of me. Because he hates me.”

“To annoy you? To drive a rift between you?” Sakura asked questioningly, and Ryoko shook her head.

“You... understand better than most people on this planet what Tenchi and my world is like.” She said softly. “Since we went to Yousai, I’ve felt that we’ve more of a connection to you and Hiroshi than other natives of this planet — ones who haven’t seen space for themselves. And you know that there are good people and bad people out there, right?”

“Yes.” Sakura was nonplussed. “I tend to count you and Tenchi in the good category, even if you have been bad in the past. Why?”

“Not everyone has got to the dividing point.” Ryoko ran her fingers through her hair. “They’re putting us all in the bad category. Which would be fine — I wouldn’t care. Except that I think there’s more to it. All of a sudden, Kyoda’s being friendly to Tenchi and Tenchi’s too dense not to see it for what it is. And I might think I was being paranoid, except that Washu has the same impression. In fact, yesterday she spoke to someone at the Space Consortium who pretty much spelled out to her — *by name* — that he thought I was a danger to Earth. Me, *and* the planet Jurai.”

“You think that people on the Earth expect an invasion?” Sakura only just managed to keep her voice down, and Ryoko nodded.

“That’s nuts.” Sayaka snorted. “The people on Jurai aren’t like that!”

“No... I don’t think they’d care enough to invade this world, even if they were.” Ryoko responded. “There’s nothing here to take... nothing they need.”

“Seiryō Tennen said that to us, when he landed here before.” Sakura agreed. “And having seen Jurai, I believe him. Why would they want to invade a minor planet light years away? Especially one where Tenchi lives — I got the impression that everything in space thinks a whole lot of Tenchi Masaki.”

“Yes... well, there’s the other complication.” Ryoko grimaced. “Tenchi’s cover on the Earth hasn’t been blown yet. Plenty of people have commented on his relationship with me, but that we share — at least in part — a common genetic origin, no one knows. He’s a Prince of Jurai in much more legitimate terms than I can be called Princess — he might even have been their Emperor, if he’d been so inclined. Can you imagine what hysterical idiots like Kyoda and whoever he’s got involved in would do, if they realised how much power Tenchi has inside of him?”

She bit her lip.

“I love him so much.” She whispered. “And I won’t do anything to make him at risk. But it puts me on edge — that even marrying him might do that, you know? Bringing attention to him, to the shrine, to everything that goes on in the Masaki family. It’s gotten so complicated. I thought I was just marrying a man I love, and moving to a planet which I’ve come to call home. But now...”

“You’re really worrying about this.” Sakura said gently. “Something major must have happened since the last time we spoke, because then your prime concern was avoiding being stifled if you opted for traditional Japanese wedding attire.”

“It hasn’t, really.” Ryoko admitted. “I’m more afraid that it’s coming. Like there’s something in the wind. In the air. That the general opinion of aliens has been slowly getting more and more grim... especially here, in Osaka.”

“So why come here?”

“Because I’m as free a citizen as anyone else, and if I want to see my friends, I will.” Ryoko said frankly. “However, I don’t want to put you at risk either, Sakura-chan. I really like having a female friend I can talk to — and I’d be really annoyed if someone made you pay for

befriending me.”

“I’m not going to change my opinions of you because some people don’t understand.” Sakura said frankly. “I was afraid at first — we all were — but we didn’t understand. Now we do — Ikeda and I both. You needn’t worry on that account. We won’t be abandoning you.”

She shrugged.

“But you should probably talk to Tenchi about Kyoda.” She added. “If you think he’s a problem. After all, as you said, Tenchi won’t look for it. He and Kane were pretty good friends, before you came to the Earth. I’m sure he’s wanted to make up the rift somehow... he might not be as rational about the implications, if he’s not looking at it objectively.”

“I just wish something could deal with Kane Kyoda, and his nasty, spying companions.” Ryoko said darkly. “But I’m not that kind of pirate. Fortunately or unfortunately, I don’t know... but it makes me uneasy.”

“I’m *glad* you’re not that kind of pirate.” Sakura said bluntly. “If you’d been the kind of alien who killed people, Ryoko, you and I wouldn’t be friends.”

“Well, it’s too messy for my tastes.” Ryoko said off-handedly. “But I wasn’t thinking so much in those terms. I’d just like to put them in a capsule and send them into pirate space for a few weeks. Then they’d understand a dangerous pirate when they saw one, and leave me alone.”

“I can’t offer you a solution to that problem.” Sakura reflected. “But I can offer you retail therapy. Even if we neither of us have money to spend this afternoon, the looking might be therapeutic. And there’s nothing more normal or Earth-like than shopping, is there?”

She grinned, and the pirate offered her a faint smile in return.

“Guess not.” She agreed. “All right. I’m game. Lead the way.”

As they made their way through the crowds of busy shoppers, Ryoko was aware of attention on her and she paused, frowning as she turned back to look the way they’d come. Nothing was immediately apparent, however, and she narrowed her eyes, pursing her lips as she tried to work out whether or not it had been her over-active imagination.

“Or are they actually spying on me in person, now?” She murmured, as Sakura sent her a quizzical look. “I wonder.”

“Ryoko? Are you coming — you’re causing a road block.” Sakura gave her a tug on the arm, and Ryoko forced her attention back to the matter at hand, offering her friend a sheepish smile.

“Sorry. I’m with you.” She replied. “Where are we heading first?”

“Just chill out a little, huh?” Sakura told her evenly. “Focus your attention on other things — on wedding things, if you like. We can take a look around at some things, see what you like — and forget all of this alien spying business. Okay?”

“Okay.” Ryoko agreed. “Thanks, ’Kura-chan. I guess maybe part of it is wedding jitters... weird as that might sound coming from a hardened space criminal.”

“Hey, you and Tenchi are the strongest couple I know. If you can’t have a happy ending, who can?” Sakura said ruefully. “Besides, I like being your wedding coach. It’s as close as I can get to a wedding of my own right now, after all.”

“You should just spit it out and tell him, you idiot.”

“We’re not going there again, Ryoko. I told you — it’s not so simple as that.” Sakura shook her head. “Especially not now this girl is on the scene.”

“You should be doing it *because* she is.” Ryoko shook her head. “Stake your claim, before it’s too late! Believe me, you’ll regret it otherwise. Live in the now a little.”

“That sounds more like you.” Sakura laughed. “And I do understand what you’re saying. I just... Ryoko?”

As the pirate hesitated again, her brows knitting together as she scanned the crowd a second time.

“Ryoko, what are you doing?” Sakura eyed her, confused, and Ryoko shook her head.

“Gotcha.” She muttered, hazing out of view and re-materialising at the other end of the street, reaching out a hand and clapping it down on the shoulder of a young man who swung around to face her, dismay in his expression as he registered her presence.

“Let me go!”

“Tell me why you’re following us, and I will.” Ryoko said simply, tightening her grasp on the man’s shoulder as he struggled to get away. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“Ishida-kun?” As Sakura approached them, she shot Ryoko a

confused look. “Ryoko, what are you doing?”

“You *know* this guy?” Ryoko asked, and Sakura nodded.

“Kenichi Ishida.” She agreed. “He was at University with us — he’s an old friend of Kane’s.”

“I see. A friend of Kane’s.” Ryoko’s eyes narrowed, and she fixed the unfortunate Kenichi with a dark, penetrating look. “That’s convenient.”

“What do you want, you crazy lady — let me go! Sakura, tell her to let me go!” Kenichi struggled against her grip once more, but it was to no avail.

“Not until you tell me why you were following us.” She said softly, and Sakura bit her lip.

“Ryoko, you’re causing a scene.” She murmured. “People are starting to stare. Let him go, huh? It doesn’t matter. Let him go.”

Ryoko’s eyes narrowed, and slowly she shook her head.

“I don’t like people tracking me.” She said slowly. “Kenichi Ishida, is it? Well, Kenichi Ishida — you better take this on board... and you can tell your friend Kane the same thing, too. A lot of people have tried to follow my trail over the years. *None* of them have ever succeeded in besting me. I’ve no interest in you or your life, but I will *not* tolerate being followed around like I’ve done something terrible and need to be under constant surveillance. Do you understand me?”

At this, Kenichi’s eyes narrowed, and he shook his head.

“You’re a pirate. A space criminal. A vandal.” He spat out, finally wrenching himself free. “You pretend to help the Earth, but you’re nothing but a liar and a fraud. And we’ll stop you — you and your kind. You’re not welcome on the Earth... with all the things you’ve done, I wonder that you can hold your head up at all!”

Ryoko’s eyes widened in surprise, and she eyed him coldly.

“You seem to know a lot about me... and yet I know next to nothing about you.” She murmured. “I wonder who’s invading whose life, here?”

“You don’t fool me!”

“I’m not trying to.” Ryoko returned scathingly. “I’m trying to live my life, just like every other citizen of this planet. I’m trying to spend an afternoon shopping with a friend and planning my wedding. If that’s so interesting to you, you really need to get yourself a hobby. Or

a girlfriend. Or both.”

“The Galaxy Police will stop you, and so will we!” Kenichi snapped back. “You might fool simple country boys like Tenchi Masaki, but you don’t fool me! We know all about you — and more, all about the kind of people Jurai really have lurking behind the scenes. Earth aren’t going to be taken for fools, Ryoko Hakubi! We have allies in the Galaxy Police, and...”

He gasped, stopping in mid-sentence as a look of surprise and alarm flooded his features. Then, without saying another word, he stumbled to his knees, crumpling on the ground unconscious before them.

Ryoko cursed, taking a step back from the man’s still form.

“What the...?” Sakura dropped down at Kenichi’s side, alarm glittering in her expression. “What happened? Did someone... Ryoko... what happened?”

“Someone shut him up.” Ryoko said quietly, her expression shaken. “And I think... I think it was intentional. I think... to make it look like I... used my... power.”

“He’s alive. He’s just unconscious.” Sakura looked relieved. “Stunned, that’s all.”

“Mmm.” Ryoko faltered, then bent at the young man’s side, conscious all the time of the swelling crowd of people that had begun to gather around the graduate’s still form. She hesitated, then stretched out her fingers to scoop up something from the back of the victim’s body. She held it up, glancing at it for a moment, then frowning.

“The Galaxy Police.” She murmured, clasping it more tightly in her fist as she slid the offending article into the folds of her clothing. “This is deeper and more rotten than we imagined, Sakura. Our rookie spy here was shot by a Galaxy Police stun gun.”

“Galaxy...” Sakura looked alarmed, and Ryoko nodded.

“And right now, you and I need to get out of here.” She added, reaching out to grab her friend by the arm, even as the crowd began to surge towards them. Some voices had already been raised in accusation against her, and as she gazed at the surrounding crowd, Ryoko realised that on more than one face was an expression of suspicion and dismay. “We’re going to the mountains, before I get framed and locked up for something I didn’t do. This is dirty — dirtier than we thought it was. If the Galaxy Police are truly involved...”

She swallowed hard, then,

“If they are, then noone in the Galaxy is safe.” She murmured.  
“What the hell are the Earth involved in... and what is going to happen to Tenchi and I if it carries on?!”

### ***End of part one.***

#### ***Author's addendum***

*There **will** be a part two to this story. So far I've five chapters written but I won't post any of it until I'm further into it. I'm back at work from Tuesday and I was away this past week so I've not got much done (my inspiration for it is coming in fits and starts depending on the mood I'm in, the anime I'm watching, the weather, etc... I'm really useless, huh....:)*

*I'm also involved in other “real life” things, and writing the Fushigi fic (which for various reasons is proving a less stressful story to write at present) so like I said, it will take a little while longer to complete than maybe some of the others have. (I really am having to use my brain a lot more this time around, and considering I don't have much of a brain to begin with, that's highly strenuous..lol!). I do know how it's going to end and I do have a comprehensive plan. It's just finding the time and energy to sit down at the PC and put that into something coherent. I really don't want to let all the people who've supported and reviewed and PMed me over the last year down, especially since this is the last story!!*

*(Brief moment of panic about whether people will hate the ending I have planned... hum...)*

*I'll do my best to have something up in the not too distant future, anyhow, but I'm not giving any definitive timescale. In the meantime, enjoy the cliffhanger and don't hate me too terribly... please?*

*::offers cookies to readers::*

*Vraie ;)*